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MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

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A Thrilling Suspense Novelet
by **EDWARD Y. BREESE**

THE DAKAR DIAMOND CASE

A New **ED NOON** Caper
by **MICHAEL AVALLONE**

... and

THE TIRED OLD MAN

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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JANUARY, 1976
VOL. 38, NO. 1

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

RIPOFF IN CRIMSON

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The import-export partnership spelled trouble from the word go—because all of the partners were thieves. But not until sudden death began stalking them did Marshall Cone call in the redheaded detective to unravel the crime.

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RIPOFF IN CRIMSON

by BRETT HALLIDAY

When Clarice Cone's body was fished out of the canal, it touched off a powder keg of violence in the upper echelons of her husband's company that developed into one of the most difficult cases of Shayne's career—and one of the most dangerous.



THE DADE COUNTY, Florida, maintenance crew was making a routine inspection and clean-up sweep of the edge-of-town drainage canal. They gathered up dead dogs and possum, thousands of pounds of pestweed, and an almost unbelievable tonnage and variety of man-made debris.

When they came to the spot where the canal and the road which bordered it both made a sharp, right-angled turn they

found skid marks and a smashed guard rail. At the bottom of the ten-foot-deep canal they found a luxury automobile.

Inside the car was the body of an expensively dressed woman.

It wasn't possible to identify her at first. The car windows had been open when it went into the canal. The woman had had her seat belt and shoulder harness fastened and for some reason hadn't been able to get out of them before she drowned.

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Complete in this issue

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL



Catfish and gar had been at her face, and the body had had time to get decomposed almost beyond recognition.

The canal cleaning crew stayed well away from the body till a couple of sheriff's deputies and an ambulance reached the scene. The deputies found the woman's bag in the car. It was full of identification.

Her name was Clarice Cone, and she and her husband Marshall Cone lived on Miami Beach.

The day after the body was found Marshall Cone sat in his Lincoln Road office, the headquarters of the import-export firm of Marshall Cone and Associates. Seated across the desk from Cone was Miami private detective Mike Shayne.

"Mr. Shayne," Cone was saying, "I want to hire you to find out who killed my wife."

"Killed your wife?" Shayne asked. "According to this morning's paper your wife died by drowning after accidentally running off the road into a canal."

"She died in that canal all right," Cone said, "but it wasn't any accident. I know that, but I can't prove it. I think you can, so I'm hiring you. I'll pay whatever you ask, but get results and get them fast. I mean fast, like yesterday."

"Mind if I ask what the big

hurry is?" Shayne said. "A case like this may take time."

"I sent for you because you're supposed to be the best in town, Shayne. The hurry is that if I'm right—and mind you I *know* I'm right—the one who killed Clarice will do a job on me next. *That's* what the hurry is. I have to know so I can stay alive myself."

"If you're right, that's reason enough," Shayne said. "I can promise you I'll do my best. Now, can you tell me who it is you think murdered your wife. That would give me a start."

"Sure I can tell you," Cone said. "I've got three partners in this business. It could be any of them."

Shayne took a cigarette from the leather-bound box on Marshall Cone's desk. He lit it and took a long pull of smoke.

"That's quite an accusation," he said, "especially when you make it against all three of your partners. Suppose you tell me why."

"My partners are thieves," Marshall Cone said. "In this business, everybody is a thief."

He omitted to add that that statement made him a thief too. Mike Shayne made a mental note of the fact, but didn't let it change his expression.

"Import-Export, the way we do it, is like that," Cone continued. "We trade in all sorts of

things—cars, appliances big and small, guns sometimes. We bring in hides, rare woods, artifacts, beef, ivory—you name it. We deal in all sorts of countries. Some of them are what you call undeveloped. To get an order, you bribe A. If you want a contract, you bribe B. When that's over, A and B pay you under the table for this and that. You see?"

"I see," Shayne said.

"To be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Shayne," Cone said, "this business is a rat race, and in a rat race only the rats win big. This firm has been winning very big indeed since we got together and started it five years ago."

Mike Shayne pulled at his cigarette and blew a smoke ring. "I see," he said.

"The pot was full of gravy," Cone said. "I know that. My partners know that. Gravy to slop over. Only the books don't show as much as they should. Somebody has been siphoning off the gravy, shall we say? Somebody has been getting in very deep. Not just a little larceny. That sort of thing I expect, but this was big—very big."

"How big, Mr. Cone? Have you any idea?"

"Sure I have an idea. I'll give you an educated guess, and make it very, very big indeed.

No petty larceny for my partners, Shayne."

Cone paused for breath.

"How much is gone?" Mike Shayne asked.

"I said big and I mean Big with a Capital B. Would you call two million dollars big money, Mr. Shayne?"

"That's big," Shayne admitted.

"Of course it is. My wife—my poor Clarice that lies dead and murdered—thought it was that big, too. We've been trying to figure who took it. I think she found out the day she died."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, she phoned me here around noon that day. It was the last time I talked to her—the last time anyone talked to her alive as far as I know. She said she knew who had been doing the big stealing."

"Didn't she give you a name?"

"No, she didn't. Neither of us trusted the phones here. They go through a switchboard and could be tapped. We figured either the phones were tapped or this office was bugged. She said she'd tell me when she saw me. Only she never got here alive."

"Can you remember her exact words, Mr. Cone?"

"Sure I can. She said, 'I know who's been ripping off the firm. Oh boy, do I know!'"

"Where was she calling from?"

"From home—from the condo where we live right up Collins Avenue."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Well—I assume that's where she was. She didn't say any different."

"All right then," Mike Shayne said. "She called from Miami Beach. She was coming downtown here to tell you who the thief was. That would only take a few minutes. Instead of that, her car goes into a canal at least fifteen miles from here, way out on the edge of town. How do you explain that?"

"Easy," Cone said. "Somebody gets in the car with her and puts a gun on her, then that somebody makes her drive way out there. He kills her and makes the car run into that canal with her dead body inside. Isn't that the way you would explain it, Mr. Shayne?"

"It's one possibility," Mike Shayne admitted.

There were other possibilities, but he didn't say so. There were questions he needed to have answered before he could be sure how Clarice Cone had died.

For instance, how could the murderer—that is, if she *was* murdered—have gotten the car going fast enough with the woman in the driver's seat to

crash through the heavy guard rail at the exact spot where it would go into the canal? Shayne calculated that meant a speed of at least sixty miles an hour. How did anyone manage to do that and still get himself safely out of the car before the crash?

It could have been done. A man with exactly the right experience, strength and skills might have been able to do it.

Shayne doubted that any of the partners in a firm of this sort had that sort of experience, strength and skill. He intended to find out.

For the moment, he didn't intend to argue with Marshall Cone. Instead, he accepted personnel files of the other three partners, promised a quick report on anything he discovered and took his leave.

II

SHAYNE FOUND HIMSELF followed down the hall from the office to the elevators in the Lincoln Road office building by a man who had obviously been waiting for him to come out.

In contrast to Marshall Cone, who was a big, expansive, soft-handed, soft-bellied man with black eyes, curly black hair and a smile that seemed perpetual even when he was talking of theft and murder,

this man was small and nervous and feral.

He stood about five feet three inches and was small-boned and sapling thin. Although apparently still in his forties, he was already balding and looked ten years older. He kept darting glances in all directions, licking his lips with a tongue that flickered in and out like a lizard's, putting his hands into his pockets, then quickly taking them out again.

He got into the elevator with Shayne. The car was crowded, so he made no attempt to talk to the big redhead as they rode down to the ground floor lobby.

Once they were out on Lincoln Road Mall, he darted up and took the big man by the elbow long enough to catch his attention. "Keep walking," he said in thin nervous tones. "I have to talk to you. It's safe out here. Nobody can bug the whole of Lincoln Mall."

"Sure, sure," said Shayne. "Who are you and what can I do for you?"

"I'm West Africa," the lizard said. "I'm a partner in Cone Import and Export."

"Don't you have a name?"

"Oh, yes, yes—I forgot. We call each other by our territories around the office. My name is Peter Parsons and my territory is West Africa and the Sahara republics. Jack Hall is



Indian Ocean—both sides. Paul Green is Indonesia and the old man handles all Spanish America. That's the way we call each other."

"I see," Shayne said. "Now, what is it you want with me?"

"I just wanted to warn you," Parsons said. "Don't believe a word old Cone tells you. He thinks we're holding out on him, but he's the real thief around here. Believe me, Shayne, he and that wife of his have been stealing the rest of us blind. You wouldn't believe it how much."

"I'd believe it if you could prove it," Mike Shayne said. "Can you?"

"I could if I could get into the safe."

"You're a partner," Mike

Shayne told him. "Don't they let the partners get into the safe?"

"The one at the office, yes," Peter Parsons said. "That isn't the safe I mean. I mean the one in Marshall Cone's apartment. He wouldn't leave papers that would give him away lying around the office. You get into his private safe like I say and you'll see."

"What makes you think I can do that?"

"I know who are are, Mr. Shayne. I recognized you from your pictures in the papers when you first came in. That's why I waited to talk to you. I wanted to tell you about that safe—and I wanted to warn you."

"Warn me about what?" Shayne asked.

"About that woman," Parsons said earnestly, darting nervous glances to left and right. "Warn you about that Clarice Cone. She wasn't alone you know—and she hated her husband."

"Tell me about it," Mike Shayne said.

"She hated her husband; but she didn't hate *him*. She was with him the day she died."

"With whom?"

"With him—with. . ."

Peter Parsons never got the name out.

Shayne heard the *splat* of a small caliber bullet smashing

into the back of the man's skull.

Parsons froze as the bullet tore into the grey matter of his brain. Then he fell forward onto his face on the sidewalk of the Lincoln Mall. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Shayne slipped into the crowd of pedestrians as he tried to spot the gunman who had killed the little partner of the export-import firm. It was hopeless. The man or woman had only to slip the gun back into a pocket, bag or briefcase and melt into the shifting pedestrians. Besides, Shayne had no idea whom he was looking for.

He didn't go back to Peter Parsons' body where it lay on the walkway. By this time, a small crowd, including a uniformed Miami Beach policeman, had gathered around the little man's body. The policeman would call an ambulance and take care of the corpse.

At this point, Shayne didn't want to be linked to the killing. There was nothing that he could do about it in any case.

Accordingly he walked north of the Mall to where he had left his Buick parked in the Burdine's Store lot. Then he drove back to Miami across the Venetian Causeway.

He had plenty to think about. When Marshall Cone first spoke to him, the big detective

had had serious doubts that the death of Clarice Cone could be anything more than an accident.

He still had his doubts—but the death of Peter Parsons was no accident. The little man had been murdered in cold blood.

Had the killer been close enough to have overheard what Parsons was trying to say? Or had the shot happened to come at that particular instant?

Shayne had no idea. The shooting had taken him completely by surprise.

It did suggest strongly, skulduggery within the firm of Marshall Cone and Associates. Also that someone was willing to commit murder in the first degree to cover it up. Was it one of the other partners, Marshall Cone himself or a third party or parties?

These were a few of the things Mike Shayne had still to learn before he could make even an educated guess.

His first stop on the Miami Side of Biscayne Bay was at the office of the County Coroner. Since Clarice Cone had died in the unincorporated area of the County, this was where her body must have been taken for examination.

He had no official standing to get him in for a look at the woman's body or the official report—but he did have friends.

Within minutes of his arrival at the Coroner's office he got an unofficial look at the autopsy report.

"What's up, Mike?" the man who showed him the file asked. "You got some reason to think there's anything wrong with this one?"

"Not really," Shayne said.

"Well, there isn't," the other told him. "The cause of death was drowning. She may or may not have been knocked out when she went through the guard rail. The body was badly decomposed. We could have missed a bruise, but there wasn't any skull injury or broken spine."

"Could she have been shot or stabbed?"

"If she was, it didn't leave any wound. No, Mike, this was an accident. That's a bad curve, and there was alcohol in her blood."

This information stopped Shayne for the moment. He couldn't probe any further without rousing a lot of comment. He'd have to give his reasons, and he realized that his client didn't want a full-scale police investigation.

He didn't know what the late Peter Parsons might have wanted. In a roundabout way, Shayne was already beginning to think of the little man as a second client. Would Parsons

have still been alive if he hadn't been trying to tell the detective what he knew?

A good question.

III

SHAYNE DECIDED to go back to his Flagler Street office and go over the personnel files Marshall Cone had given him.

He found his beautiful secretary and helper, Lucy Hamilton, at her desk in the office, typing some papers concerning a routine case he had concluded a few days before.

She smiled at him over her typewriter.

"Hello, Angel," Shayne said. "How's it going?"

"Fine," she said. "You've had three phone calls in the last twenty minutes—all from the same woman. But she won't leave her name or number. I told her I had no idea when you'd be back in the office, but to leave a number to call when you did. She said she'd keep on calling till she got you."

"Okay," said Shayne. "I've got some stuff to look over here while I wait."

The folders Marshall Cone had given him were interesting. The head of the firm had apparently had his partners thoroughly investigated by private detectives in the other cities where they had lived and

worked, as well as in Miami. He recognized the signatures on some of the reports.

It fed his ego that, in this time of emergency, he had been chosen to handle the case instead of any of the other local investigators.

Cone had also obtained extensive credit reports on all three of his partners. The pictures these reports painted were not pretty. All of them had had brushes with the law—although only one had actually been committed and served time.

Curiously, that one was Peter Parsons. The dead man had been convicted ten years before in a Los Angeles court and served three years for grand larceny—bunco. He seemed to have sold the same block of over-the-counter stocks to two different persons.

The other two partners had been investigated and even arrested on occasion, but never convicted.

Only one of the three had a record of violent crime. That was Jack Hall. He had been arrested four times on charges of assault, mugging and resisting an officer. All of the charges were years old, when Hall was under twenty. He had never served time on any of them. According to the reports, an uncle who was a minor politi-

cian in his home town had kept him from paying all legal penalties.

The picture in that folder showed a big, handsome, muscular redhead who might even have been a younger cousin of Shayne himself.

The picture of Paul Green also showed a handsome man in his middle years, but black haired with sideburns and a mustache. Green had had his license as a real estate broker suspended for questionable practices.

By then, Shayne had begun to wonder what a similar folder on Marshall Cone himself might reveal. He said as much to Lucy Hamilton.

"Looks as if I'm into a real can of worms, Angel. That is, if they're all worms and not snakes with poisoned fangs."

"At least one of them has to be a snake, Michael," she said. "Whoever killed that little man is more viper than worm in my book."

"Mine, too," Shayne agreed. "The trouble is, there's no evidence he also killed the boss's wife."

"Maybe the Coroner's office missed the evidence of that. There's all sorts of ways she could have been knocked out or rendered helpless before the car went off the road."

"Maybe," Shayne said, "but I

don't think so, Angel. That car didn't simply run off a road. It had to be moving fast enough to go through a heavy guard rail. Besides, the coroner's boys are pretty good at spotting that sort of evidence."

"The body was in the water a long time," she said.

"About four days." Shayne nodded. "The water was warm, too, and there were gar and crawfish. Evidence could have been hidden. There's no way of ruling it out—at least not yet."

The phone rang. Lucy Hamilton answered, listened for a moment, then waved for Shayne to pick up the instrument on his desk.

"Mike Shayne here," the big man said.

The voice was that of a woman—a mature voice, warm, vibrant, sexy.

"My name is Isabel Parsons," she said. "I understand you're working on a case for Marshall Cone?"

"I had a conference with Mr. Cone," Shayne said guardedly.

"Then you know that my husband is—*was*—one of Cone's partners. Mr. Shayne. My husband was murdered right out in the street only an hour ago. I have to see you and talk to you. I think I'd be able to name the one who did it."

"Why not call the police?" Mike Shayne asked.

"Because none of us wants the police involved," she said. "Besides, that would bring me out in the open. I might be in very real danger myself in that case. No, it's you I want to talk to, Mike Shayne, and nobody else. It's no secret that Cone called you in—but I don't want you to tell anybody that I spoke to you."

"Why not?"

"You'll have to promise me that," the sultry voice said. "It isn't much to ask. What I have to tell you is very important. Believe me—it is. It's information you need and you can be free to use it so long as you don't reveal where you got it. That's all I ask."

Shayne thought for a minute before he answered: "Okay. I won't tell anyone you told me. Now, what is it you know?"

"Not on the phone," Isabel Parsons said.

"Come to my office then."

"No—not your place or mine." She named a cocktail bar close to Flagler Street on Biscayne Boulevard. "You be in one of the booths there in fifteen minutes. I'll come in a few minutes later and sit with you. That way, our conversation won't be bugged."

It occurred to Shayne that Isabel Parsons either hadn't considered his wearing a mini-mike or didn't care.

Perhaps she intended wearing a similar rig herself. He made a mental note to look for signs.

Aloud, he said, "Okay. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

IV

THE COCKTAIL LOUNGE didn't serve meals, so it hadn't filled up this early in the day. Shayne had no trouble finding a booth in a semi-dark corner away from the bar. He ordered a Martell and water and waited.

Isabel Parsons came in very quietly behind a group of four noisy salesmen headed for the bar. Shayne didn't spot her till she was almost at the booth. She slid gracefully into the seat across from him and put her handbag on the table.

She wore dark glasses and a wide brimmed hat tilted so that no one at the bar could get a really good look at her. When the waitress came, she ordered a double martini in the same husky voice he had heard over the phone.

"I'm scared, that's why the melodrama," she said after the girl had brought the drink and departed. "I don't usually do the cloak and dagger act—but I really am scared."

Shayne drank brandy from the big bell glass and followed it with a sip of cold water.

"Suppose you start by telling me what scares you." He looked her over closely as he spoke.

Isabel Parsons was a beautiful and apparently sophisticated woman—a far cry from the nervous little man who had been shot to death on the Lincoln Road Mall. For one thing she stood at least three inches taller than her late husband. For another, she looked a good ten years younger.

Her figure was seductive, svelte, opulent and superbly gowned in an expensive black sheath dress. Black hair was tucked under the wide hat. Shayne couldn't see the eyes behind the dark glasses, but he surmised that they too were black. Her skin was warmly olive.

She wore a single strand of finely matched pearls around a slim, beautiful throat.

She noted his regard, uttered an amused laugh. "You'll know me if you ever see me again," she said.

Shayne laughed, too. "It's a part of my job," he said.

"Are you *sure* that's all it is?" Her voice was even more seductive than on the phone. "You're an extremely attractive man, Mr. Shayne, and any woman likes admiration."

"You're supposed to be frightened," he reminded her.

"So I am. Actually, I really



Lucy Hamilton

am scared. Peter and I hadn't been a great romance for years now—but his death this morning was a shock all the same—even more so because I think that whoever shot him may have me on his list to be next."

A pause, then, "Marshall Cone must have told you about the trouble in the firm?"

Shayne nodded.

"Good. Then you know all of them suspect the others of stealing from the firm and each other—also that Marshall connected poor Clarice's death with whatever's been going on."

"I know," Shayne said.

"What you don't know," Isabel Parsons said, "is that Peter was making his own investigation."

As she spoke, she lifted her glass and drank most of the double martini. She drank like a man, with one long swallow and her head thrown back to

show her beautiful throat. The strong drink didn't make her flinch at all.

"That firm is a regular snake pit," she continued. "Of course they were all stealing—Marshall too. In a firm of that sort it's expected. All of them are bribed by the people they do business with. The bribes are supposed to be turned in—but they aren't, any more than a waitress in a place like this declares all her tips or the money her after-hours dates give her.

"Then they all have special slush funds to bribe with in turn. It's easy to rip off some of that. That sort of thing is par for the game. What isn't par was that somebody has been pulling a really big ripoff—big enough to hurt."

She stopped and drank the rest of the martini. "Whoever that was—it wasn't my Peter. Not that he was above it. He just didn't have the chance. He got wind of it by accident and he didn't dare tell any of the rest. He had to find out first who it was."

"I can see your point," Shayne said. He was thinking as he had many times before, that the life of a private detective might be thorny, but it could still be a bed of roses compared to those of some of his clients.

"Did he find out what he wanted to know?" he asked.

She nodded, and Shayne got the impression that the eyes behind the dark glasses were boring into his own. "He *thought* he knew," she said. "He had proof. I have it now—or at least I know where he hid it and can get my hands on it."

"Where is it?" Shayne asked.

"Not so fast," Isabel Parsons said. "I know you'd like to have that information. Then you could run right back to Marshall Cone and pick up your fee. He'd pay even if the name Peter had was his own. He'd pay even better for that.

"I'm not that much of a fool, Shayne. I'm not about to give away a fortune. Peter didn't leave any big insurance policies, you know. The name he had and the proof are my insurance policies. Marshall Cone can have them, but not for free."

She paused and waited.

Shayne waited too. He could see the picture shaping up now, but he was not yet sure how best to deal with it. This was no ordinary woman to be controlled by ordinary tactics. He decided to let her talk some more.

"What you're discussing is blackmail plain and simple, Mrs. Parsons," he said. "I'm not that kind of a private detective:

If you know anything about my record, you must know that about me."

"Call me Isabel," she said in that throaty voice. "Of course I know you aren't a double dealing shamus. That's not the question. Nor is this blackmail. I suppose you might say so if the name on those papers turns out to be Marshall Cone. I don't think it is.

"What I'm doing is selling confidential business information to a man who is ready, willing and able to pay for it. I need your help to consummate that sale—and I'm willing to pay you for that help. That's all it is, Mike—a business deal with a generous fee to you for services rendered."

Shayne couldn't help feeling admiration for this woman. Isabel Parsons was no ordinary person. Hers was a keen and active mind.

"You make quite a case, Isabel," the big detective told her. "A couple of points need clearing up. First of all, what makes you think you need my help?"

"I'm afraid," Isabel said, and Shayne felt sure she was being honest about that. "I'm afraid," she repeated. "Peter only learned what he wanted to know a couple of days ago. Now he's dead. Clarice Cone is dead. Believe me, Mike, I don't want

to be dead, too. That's why I need you as a go-between."

"I see."

"That's right. I know you've already been hired to look into this whole thing. You can go to Marshall. Tell the big man you know where the proof is—but the party who has it wants a million dollars in cash. Don't tell him you have the proof yourself—and that will be the truth. Simply tell him the party who has it wants a million."

"He might tell me to kill that party and get the proof for him that way," Mike Shayne suggested.

"By God!" she said. "He probably will at that. What will you tell him?"

"I'll tell him the truth," Shayne said. "I'm not a hit man. I don't kill anybody for money. Not ever, except in self defense, and then only if I can't help myself. He can check and find that out for himself."

"You'd be running a risk," she told him.

"I know," Shayne said. "The risk that then he'd send a hit man to follow me in case I contacted you. I don't think Marshall Cone would do that, though. He knows I can take care of myself."

"Would he pay off a million?"

"I don't know," the big detective said. "I only met the man this morning. You know him a

lot better than I do. What do you think?"

"I think he'll pay or I wouldn't have called you," Isabel Parsons said. "As you say, I know the man. He isn't the killer type. He can afford to pay a million, and he will."

They sat for a long moment, watching each other across the table in the dimly lighted bar.

"What do you say, Mike Shayne? Is it a deal? We could have a lot of fun with a million to spend."

"It's tempting," Mike Shayne said. "I'll think about it."

"Oh, hell!" she said in obvious disappointment.

"I have to think."

"Oh come on, Mike. A million dollars—a cool million to split. Maybe we wouldn't even have to split. I like you—and you know I'm attractive. Give me a chance to prove it. We don't have time to waste."

"I'm being honest with you," the big man said. "I have to think about it. I'll let you know."

"At least, will you take my story to Marshall?"

"That's got to be thought over, too, honey," he said.

V

ISABEL PARSONS sat silent, watching him. Then she said, "If that's it, I won't push you. I

will do one thing for you, though. I'll give you a freebie for what it's worth—just to show you I'm on the level."

"What's that?"

"Clarice Cone had a lover," Isabel said. "She was on her way to see him when she died."

"Who was he?" the redhead asked.

"I'm not sure," Isabel Parsons said. "I think it was one of the other partners, but she never did mention exactly any name. She hinted—but that was about all of it."

"You're sure?" the big man asked her again.

"Of course, I'm sure of the lover part," Isabel said. "One woman can't fool another about a thing like that. Right at the start—and that was months ago—she didn't really try very hard to fool me, anyway. Clarice and I always liked each other. Not well enough so she'd name names—but she knew I didn't like Marshall and wouldn't run and tell him anything."

"I see."

"Well, the day she was first missing we saw each other in the morning. We always patronized the same beauty parlor, and we were there that morning. Believe me, she was really getting the full treatment—the works."

"I asked her why, and she let

on she was having a real heavy meet with lover-boy that afternoon. She was all excited."

"Something special going on?" the big detective asked her warily.

"Something very, *very* special," Isabel replied. "I got the idea she was on the point of leaving Marshall for good and all. She did not say that exactly. She only hinted, but the hints were plenty broad. She was so excited, too—all aglow like a woman at one of the really big moments in her life. You see what I mean?"

"I see," Shayne said. He was inclined to believe Isabel Parsons. One woman would sense something like that about another. It would also account for the fact that Clarice Cone had died miles away from the route that would take her to her husband.

Was the lover with her just before the crash? Had she already met him or was she still on her way to the romantic rendezvous?

"Do you have any idea why she was running off at just this time?" he asked. "Did she say anything that might give you a clue?"

"No, she didn't. Come to think of it, though—it might have been connected with all the fuss going on at the office about who was ripping off

whom. Especially if lover boy was doing the big rip-off."

Isabel Parsons' announcement was more of a shock to him than the big man wanted her to realize. For the first time since the case began, it raised serious doubts as to the nature of Clarice Cone's death.

If her lover had been the man who was stealing from the firm—quite possibly with her connivance and help—she might well have been murdered at this time of crisis to shut her up—possibly to avoid having to split the loot.

Also, if Marshall Cone knew of his wife's infidelity, he might have chosen a time when her death could be blamed on someone else, then killed her himself. Either way, Shayne was going to have to move fast and forcefully to find out.

The first thing to do was to get in touch with the two other partners in the firm. This meant that, for the time being, he'd have to get rid of Isabel Parsons.

She saved him the trouble of thinking up an excuse. "Much as I'd like to, lover boy," she said, "I can't hang around here any longer. I've got to make a couple of appearances as the bereaved widow and sorrowing wife, if you know what I mean.

"On the other hand we can't wait too long before we get go-

ing on the proposition I made you. Somebody else might get the same idea."

She dug into her handbag and came up with two doorkeys tied with a piece of pink ribbon. She untied the ribbon and gave one key to the red-headed private eye.

"This opens the front door of an apartment owned by a friend of mine." She gave him the address of a condominium on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach. "She's out of town and lets me use it. You come there after ten tonight and let yourself in. We can make our plans then."

"I'll still have to do some hard thinking," Shayne said.

"Go ahead and think," said Isabel. She reached out and touched his hand for a moment. Her fingers were warm and soft and sensual.

Shayne let his hand lie under hers. It was a pleasantly exciting feeling. This woman was ripe with personality and sensuality.

"Go ahead and think about it," she repeated. "I'm not the least worried about how you'll decide. I've made you a proposition only an idiot would want to refuse."

Then she was gone from the booth.

Shayne finished his brandy and thought it over. There was

much for him to do, and not nearly enough time in which to do it.

His first move was to call one of his friends with the County Sheriff's Office. There was nothing particularly confidential about the information he wanted, so he had no difficulty getting it.

The car in which Clarice Cone had died had been taken to the County Pound. After a time, if it was not needed for evidence or claimed by the owner's heirs, it would be auctioned off. Meanwhile anyone who wanted could have access to the Pound, and so to the car. The place was full of people and two trucks coming and going on routine business.

Another call told him nothing unusual had been found in the wrecked car. Clarice Cone had been carrying a handbag now in the Sheriff's Department Property Room until claimed by her husband. Cone had taken it out. There had been no other bags in the car—specifically no luggage. The trunk held only a jack and a spare tire.

Mike Shayne wasn't satisfied. He got into his own car and drove over to the County Pound. For a generous tip one of the men on duty pointed out the car the big redhead was looking for.

It had cost somebody a lot of

money. It was painted a bright red with gold trim. The seat upholstery was gold and so was the vinyl roof. The front end had been badly smashed when the car went through the guard rail, and four days in the dirty, greasy water of the canal had done nothing at all to improve the interior.

This wasn't what really caught Mike Shayne's eyes though. Someone had been at the car before him. The upholstery was slashed to shreds. Both hood and trunk were wide open.

To Shayne's highly professional gaze, it was clear that the wrecked car had been gone over by an expert—*after* it had been taken out of the canal bottom. In the crowded and busy Pound, it would have been easy enough without anyone noticing.

Apparently, Clarice Cone had had something with her that someone else wanted very badly, indeed.

Shayne wondered whether the searcher had found what he was looking for. The redhead wanted to find it too—but he had no idea of what he should look for.

He decided to try something that had worked for him in the past. He relaxed and studied the wrecked automobile with a deliberately casual glance. Try-

ing too hard could completely spoil his effort.

What he had to do was akin to Extra Sensory Perception. He just looked at the car as a car. He didn't try to tell himself what he was looking for, but hoped that, if anything were unusual or out of its natural order, he would pick it up.

It worked. On his second circuit of the wrecked vehicle he spotted the unusual.

The rear license plate was fastened by two nuts. One was very tight and had rusted fast. The other was loose, as if it had recently been removed and not properly tightened when it was screwed back into place.

It might mean nothing at all. Or...

Shayne decided to find out. The screw yielded easily to his fingers. Once it was out he was able to bend the license plate outward without trouble. A crease in the plate showed that it had been bent recently. Something in a plastic envelope had been taped securely to the back of the plate. Shayne ripped it loose with his fingers. Then he bent the plate back and tightened the loose nut. All of this took only a few minutes.

When he got the tape off the clear plastic envelope, he saw that it contained a flat key. It was the sort that might fit a safety deposit box—or, by the

same token, the sort of metal locker for rent in a bus station or an airport concourse.

Shayne chuckled when he recognised the key. He made an educated guess that whatever it unlocked probably was stuffed with money missing from the firm of Marshall Cone and Associates. He surmised also that it was probably one of those same associates who had ripped the car apart looking for this same key.

The problem was—which? It could even have been Peter Parsons. The little man had had plenty of time between the finding of the car in the canal and the moment when a bullet snuffed out his life.

For the moment, Shayne didn't even open the plastic envelope. It was enough for the big man that he had the key in his possession. He put it away carefully in his wallet, then walked back to the County Pound Office at one end of the lot and had a brief talk with the foreman in charge of the lot.

A couple of twenty-dollar bills changed hands.

From that point on, anyone showing an interest in Clarice Cone's car would be observed and the description taken down for Mike Shayne's information.

Then the big detective used the office phone to call Mar-

shall Cone over on the Beach. He spoke briefly and to the point, but without mentioning the key he had found.

"It's important," he concluded.

"All right," Marshall Cone said, "You come on over, and I'll set it up."

VI

AN HOUR LATER, Shayne was sitting in the private office of Marshall Cone and Associates for the second time that day. This time, however, all three of the surviving partners were there with him. Cone sat behind his big desk and tried hard to look both at ease and in control of the situation.

At his left—Shayne's right—sat Jack Hall, the redheaded partner. In person, Hall looked even more a younger version of Shayne than his picture—a much younger version, wearing expensive, mod-type clothes, a knit suit with wide lapels and flaring pant legs and a gaudy silk tie.

He looked enough of a ladies' man to have been the lover of the late Clarice Cone. So, from Shayne's point of view, did the partner on his left.

Paul Green was also expensively dressed. He had black hair—worn long to his collar and carefully curled—and a

mustache and sideburns. His suit was pure Italian silk. He had on alligator shoes that carried a price tag of at least eighty dollars in one of the Lincoln Mall stores a few flights down from where they sat. Like Isabel Parsons in the cocktail bar, Green hid his eyes behind dark glasses.

All three men sat quiet as crouched leopards. They looked as suave and deadly to the detective. Marshall Cone broke the silence.

"This meeting was called at your request, Mr. Shayne. Suppose you tell us why."

"Of course," Mike Shayne said. "I thought it was time we dropped all the damn nonsense and came out in the open. If I'm to do any good at all here, gentlemen, the cards have got to go face up on the table."

That was a shocker as the big detective had intended it to be. It froze the three men watching him with cold and deadly eyes.

"Explain yourself," Marshall Cone said finally.

"That's hardly necessary," Mike Shayne said. "Whether you've been told in so many words or not, you three are all aware of the situation. You have all been stealing from the firm and from each other. At least one of you has managed to steal very big indeed."

He had their full attention.



Now was the time to set off the bomb.

"On top of the stealing," he said, "one of you has already been murdered. I mean Peter Parsons, who was probably stealing like the rest of you. That he was murdered is certain."

"It's almost as certain that Mrs. Cone was murdered. I didn't think so when her hus-

band called me in this morning—but I do now.”

Shayne paused. He had hoped for a shock reaction from one of the men, but failed to get it. So the big detective dropped his final bombshell.

“You all know that Clarice Cone was supposed to be on her way here when she died. The place where she died makes that impossible. She wasn’t coming here. She was taking something to someone when she died.

“I went over to the County Pound and looked over the car a little while ago. It had been recently about ripped to pieces by someone searching for whatever it was she was carrying. I have evidence that he found what he sought.”

That really jolted them.

“I found that an envelope or a small package had been securely taped to the back of the car’s license plate,” Shayne said. “Whatever it was—it was gone. Only some of the tape was left. Whoever searched the car got what he wanted.”

He could tell by their frozen faces that all three were fighting hard to keep control. He didn’t expect them to break right then and there. Each of them was wondering which of the others had found the key that rested at the moment in Shayne’s wallet.

Each was wondering which of the others had it.

Shayne was thinking that whichever had searched the car and missed the hiding place must be seething like a volcano. Sooner or later, he would detonate. He’d have to.

He had already killed Peter Parsons and, quite probably Clarice Cone. He wouldn’t hesitate to kill again to get hold of that little key. As soon as he thought he knew which of his partners had found it—that partner would almost certainly be doomed.

But Shayne wasn’t through with them yet.

“That’s not all, gentlemen,” he told them. “I had a phone call at the office after I left here this morning and, frankly, I don’t entirely understand what it was all about. I think I’m supposed to believe that you will understand it.”

“What was the message?” Marshall Cone asked. His voice was tight and strained.

“I’ll quote it for you exactly,” big Shayne said. “Tell Cone and his boys I have what they all want. I can give names and proof. If they doubt it, I can arrange to give a sample. If they want the rest—then it’s going to cost them a million dollars. I don’t care who gets it. The first to show a million in cash takes all.”

"My God!" yelled Jack Hall.

"I *thought* it would be a shocker," Shayne said. "But there it is."

"Was it a man or a woman's voice?" Marshall Cone asked.

"I honestly don't know," the detective told them. "Whoever was talking probably had a handkerchief over the mouth-piece and was trying to disguise the tone. If so, he managed it as far as I'm concerned."

"*That tears it,*" Marshall Cone half-shouted as he slammed his fist down on the desk top. "That tears it *for sure!* Which one of you bastards is trying to ruin the rest of us?"

"Which one of *us*?" Green shouted back. The emotional volcano Shayne had stirred up was erupting. "Why, you old weasel—what do you mean by accusing *us*! How do we know *you* aren't the one? Who called Shayne? For that matter, how do we know *you* aren't the one that's been ripping off this firm from the start?"

"That's right!" Jack Hall said with equal heat. "Who's had a better chance right from the beginning? You're the big he-wolf around here. Let's have a look at your books first."

"While we're talking about looking at books," Cone shouted back, "we'll look at them all. Shayne, I want you to investigate both these so-called

partners of mine." His face was turning purple.

"Hold on," Shayne said. "You men settle this among yourselves. What I want to know is what to say if that voice calls me again? If and when he asks for a million dollars again, what do you men want me to tell him. Do you pay, or don't you?"

"That's the question, all right," Jack Hall said, looking at Marshall Cone. "You're the boss and you're the only one who has a million dollars. What does Shayne tell this blackmailing so and so?"

"That's right," Paul Green said. "You're the boss. Do we tell him to go to hell?"

Cone appeared to be thinking. "I'll tell you what," he said finally to Shayne. "You tell this character we want to see the sample he talked about. Tell him to put up or shut up. That will give us time to think."

The other two nodded.

"What's more," Cone continued, "it will give you time to find out who it is. That's your prime assignment now, Shayne. Find out who called you."

"Then what?" Shayne asked.

"Then *you* tell us. Stall him when he calls and set up any sort of meeting if he wants to show samples. When you know who it is, tell us. We'll take it from there."

That was the way they left it.

Shayne already knew who the caller was, of course, but at this point he had no idea of giving away Isabel Parsons to the three frightened and angry men. He wanted first to talk to Isabel and find out what she had that she thought Cone and his partners would pay a million dollars for. Then he had to smoke out the identity of the partner—or other person—who had killed Peter Parsons and/or Clarice Cone.

The death of Mrs. Cone still baffled the detective. He could not forget that no evidence of murder had been uncovered by the County Coroner's people—even granted the fact that they weren't looking for anything but accidental death.

Also, if Clarice Cone had been killed to get the key which now rested in Mike Shayne's wallet—then why hadn't the killer made sure he had the key before killing her, or at least before he put the car into the canal? The car might have lain there to rust away for months but for the accident of the cleaning crew's discovery.

That raised another interesting point. Were the killer and the person who searched the wrecked car two different individuals? Had Marshall Cone killed his wife for infidelity without realizing that the key

was taped to the licence plate? Then had her lover come looking for the key?

Shayne turned these thoughts over in his mind as he drove back to his office across the causeway from Miami Beach.

VII

ONCE BACK at the office, Mike Shayne described the scene at the export-import company office to Lucy Hamilton.

"You certainly smoked out a bee tree," Lucy said. "They must be flying around like angry hornets. Don't you think you're taking an awful chance, though, Michael? At least one of that crowd has already committed a murder."

"That's why I had to use the shock treatment, Angel," he told her. "Whoever it was killed Parsons would do it again all right. I figure I have a better chance to nail him if he tries it on my schedule, not on his."

"Some day," Lucy said, "you'll try that with the wrong man. That's what I'm afraid of."

"Don't worry about me, Angel," Shayne said. "I figure the honest man always has the edge, and it's worked for me so far. He'll do something reckless and I'll nail him." A pause, then, "While I'm waiting, I might as well check out this

thing I took off the wrecked car."

He took the plastic envelope out of his wallet, carefully slit one end and spilled the key out on his desktop. It was a locker key, with the number 27 stamped on one side. It was dirty with heavy grease congealed on the shank. Shayne handled it with a pair of big tweezers from out of his desk drawer.

"It's too big to be a safety deposit key—and not the right shape," he said thoughtfully. "What do *you* think it is?"

"I think about what you do, Michael," Lucy said. "It looks to me like an ordinary locker. I'd give you odds it came from the Greyhound Bus station a couple of blocks over. They have a bank of rental lockers and that looks like one of their keys."

"I think you're right," Shayne said. "First, though, there's something else I want to check."

Using a wooden toothpick as a spatula and holding the key with the tweezers, he scraped the caked grease and dirt off the shank of the key.

"I wondered why that was there," He said. "Look here, Angel."

Someone had used a diamond or carbide-tipped scribe to scratch a series of numbers very faintly into the metal

shank of the key. Then he or she had rubbed the dirty grease over it. Until it was scraped off, the numbers remained quite invisible.

"I wonder what *that* is?" Shayne mused.

The numbers had been arranged in three groups separated by dashes—62-4443-26.

"They could have been on the key all along," Lucy Hamilton said. "We don't really know that Mrs. Cone put them there. For that matter, we don't even know that she was the one who taped the key to the licence plate."

"I'd lay you odds she did," Shayne said. "You should have seen those three partners wince when I mentioned this thing. I think they all know a lot more about what it is than you and I do right now."

"We can do something about that, Michael," she said. "Get on over to the bus station and see what you find."

It was only a ten minute round trip to the Greyhound station. When he returned, Shayne smiled at the expectant look on Lucy Hamilton's pretty face.

"You'll never guess, Angel."

"I'm not going to do any guessing, Michael. Instead, you're going to stop teasing and tell me what you found."

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"Not exactly," Mike Shayne said. "Actually I found a locker number twenty-seven, and the key fitted. It also matched type with the other keys in the locker bank, so it opened the locker."

"And?"

"And nothing at all, Angel. The locker was empty. Either somebody beat me to it—those lockers aren't hard to jimmy—or there never was anything inside."

"Which do you think?"

"I don't know. One of the partners could have beaten me to it—but he'd have had to know the location and number of the locker. If he knew that much, why would he have torn the car apart looking for a key he didn't really need?"

"Maybe there were two of them," Lucy Hamilton suggested. "One knew about the key and other wanted to find it."

"That's fine and dandy," Shayne said. "So we have the little man who wasn't there, and his little brother who wasn't there, either."

"Don't be facetious, Michael. What are you going to do next? I know you. You won't let them have a free hand."

"No," Mike Shayne said. "I'm not about to do that. To start

with I think I'll confuse the issue a bit."

"How?"

"Well, for one thing, I picked up a couple more locker keys out of unrented lockers while I was there. I'm going to leave one blank except for the regular locker number. If you'll give me that diamond scriber we bought to mark evidence, I'm going to scratch numbers on the other key to match the ones on the original. I'm going to use the same series but reverse them."

"Oh?"

"That's it. If someone comes after me looking for a key, they'll have a choice and I'll see what they do about that."

By then it was late afternoon, and Mike Shayne was hungry. He decided to take Lucy to dinner at one of their favorite spots—the Steak House on Biscayne Boulevard.

When Shayne went to the Greyhound Bus Station and locker number twenty-seven, he had taken considerable precautions. He'd gone out the back entrance to his office building and cut through a couple of alleys—afterwards returning by a circuitous route down the Boulevard to Flagler Street. He was pretty sure no one had followed him on that fishing expedition.

This time, he got the Buick

out of the parking garage and drove Lucy Hamilton to the Steak House. A small and battered red German bug stayed about three cars back of him all the way.

"I think we have a tail, Michael," Lucy Hamilton said before they had passed Fifth Street."

"I'm sure of it," Mike Shayne replied. "Don't let him know we know he's there. Maybe he'll use the same car later on, when it will be more important to spot him."

The bug stayed far enough back so they never did manage a good look at the driver. All they could see was that it was either a man or a woman wearing a man's suit and hat and dark glasses.

The steaks, as they had expected, were two inches thick, blood rare and tender enough to be cut with a fork. The home-fried potatoes were tenderly browned and fragrant with onion. The salads were icy and crisp.

Shayne ordered a double portion of Dutch apple pie with homemade ice cream for dessert. He was finishing the last mouthful when the waiter brought an extension phone over to their booth and plugged it in.

"A call for you, Mr. Shayne. He says it's important."



"Shayne here," the big man said into the mouthpiece.

"Mr. Shayne," the voice over the wire said, "this is Jack Hall of Cone Associates. I heard this is one of your favorite eating places and took a chance on catching you there."

"You're in luck," Shayne said and waited.

"I have to talk with you," Hall said. "Can I see you at your office in about twenty minutes? I'm in downtown Miami

right now and can meet you there easily."

"Can't you say it on the phone?"

"I'm sorry," Jack Hall said. "I have to be sure this is absolutely private. Somebody might have a mobile tap on me right now. It's terribly important."

The big man thought for a moment, then said, "Okay. Twenty minutes. I'll be there." He hung up.

After Shayne signed the dinner tab he asked Lucy to take a cab on up the Boulevard to her East Side apartment.

"I may need you later," he told her. "If so, I'll call Tim then, you sit tight."

Lucy knew her big boss well. "You think there could be some danger at the office," she said. "Is that it?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "and I won't really need you anyway. I can punch on one of the recorders if there's any of this I may need later."

"That doesn't answer my question, Michael."

"All right, then. We don't know what Jack Hall is up to—That is, if it was Hall on the phone. We do know there's at least one killer in this bunch. We know I have a key somebody wants very badly. Now this could be a quiet little talk I'm heading for—but on the long chance it isn't, I'd feel

better if I didn't have to worry about you when and if the rough stuff starts."

"That's not fair," Lucy said. "You know I can take care of myself and I never get in your way."

She did as he wanted, though, and let him put her aboard a northbound cab. He watched traffic after the cab pulled away, but there was no little red bug in sight.

He went back to the parking lot and got his own car. Though he watched closely, he couldn't be sure whether or not he was followed as he drove south again. Once he thought he saw a red bug, but it was at least a block behind him and there were a lot of cars of that make and color on the streets of Dade County.

VIII

IF SHAYNE WERE being followed it wasn't Jack Hall doing the job. Hall was waiting outside the locked door of his Flagler Street office when the detective came up the stairs. Shayne unlocked the door and let them both in.

Hall was obviously nervous. He watched carefully to see that Mike Shayne locked the office door from inside. Then he was careful to pull his chair into a position where he

couldn't be seen through the window.

Shayne was almost sorry for the big Cone Associates partner. He got a bottle of Martell and a couple of tumblers out of the back room and poured them both a stiff three-finger jolt.

Hall took his down in one long swallow, which made Shayne decide it was a waste of good brandy. He sipped his own drink more slowly and followed it with a chaser from the water cooler.

"All right, now," he told Hall, "let's get down to the nitty gritty. What's so all fired important?"

"I don't know quite how to begin," Hall said.

"Try taking it right from the top. Don't leave anything out. Tell it exactly like it is."

Hall looked as if he could use another drink, but Shayne didn't offer him one.

Hall finally said. "I made some inquiries about you and everybody says not to fool around with Mike Shayne. I figured if that's so, I'd better tell you first. At least that way you'll hear my side of the story. And don't worry about my holding anything back. It would discredit me in your eyes, and it's important, believe me."

"Try me," Shayne said.

"I suppose you've already found out a great deal about

our firm. You must know we partners aren't that you could call a devoted band of brothers."

"It's my business to find out these things," Mike Shayne said. "On the other hand, nobody's perfect. Suppose you tell me what you know."

"Well, we all suspect each other of stealing from the firm, to put it crudely."

"Put it as crudely as you wish," Shayne said. "You won't shock me."

"Okay then. All of us have had our fingers in the till more than once. I'll admit I have. Hell, man, you know what sort of business we're in. Nothing serious—nothing big. I held back a bribe and padded an expense account once in a while. Nothing worse than a waiter holding out a big tip. You know."

"I know," Shayne said. "Is that sort of story worth this meeting with me?"

"I'm getting to the rough part," Jack Hall said. "Lately, we've all become aware somebody wasn't satisfied with the petty larceny. Somebody was stealing big. It wasn't the junior partners, either."

"You said as much this afternoon," Shayne said.

"You're damned right I did. I charged Marshall Cone to his face. I'll do it again and in court as soon as I can get the

proof. Sooner or later I will have proof."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because I know. I have the word from the horse's mouth."

"Horses don't talk in court," Shayne said. "You'll have to do better than that to convince even me—let alone the State's Attorney."

"All right then, I'll put the cards on the table. I know Marshall ripped off the million because Clarice told me. She knew. She'd seen the proof."

"Why should the late Mrs. Cone confide that sort of information to one of her husband's partners?" Shayne asked. "That's the first thing they'll ask you, and you'd better have a good answer."

"I've got the best," Hall snapped. "Damn it, Shayne, Clarice and I were lovers. We've been sleeping together for the past year. It was me she cared enough about to want to protect, not that thieving pig of a husband. We were going away together as soon as..."

He stopped there.

Mike Shayne finished it for him.

"As soon as you could get your hands on the missing million dollars."

"I didn't say that. *You* did."

"Let's not quibble," Shayne told him. "Was she enroute to meet you when she died?"

"That was supposed to be it," Hall said. "She said she'd have the key to the location of the money with her. Marshall had gotten it and she'd read it and was bringing it to me. When I checked the accuracy of the location we two would take off together and leave Marshall and the rest of them holding an empty bag. I arranged a rendezvous at a bar on University Drive in Lauderdale."

"That accounts for her being so far out west of town," Shayne said.

"Right—only she never showed up."

"That isn't what the police and the State's Attorney will say," Mike Shayne said. "They'll say you met her out by the canal, got the key from her, *killed* her, then ran the car into the canal."

"That's a lie! I didn't kill Clarice. I loved her—I swear it."

"Nobody's going to be impressed when you swear it, Hall. The real question is—can you prove it?"

"No," Hall said. "Only—isn't the best proof the fact that I'm here now? If I'd done what you said, I'd have what I wanted and all I'd have to do is lie low a while and then take off. No, I was waiting for Clarice in Lauderdale. Somebody else killed her. Somebody else

searched the car and got his hands on whatever it was she was bringing me."

"Or you had already *gotten* it," said Shayne, "and whoever searched the car was too late, same as I was. It's six of one and half a dozen of the other, Hall."

"I'm telling you the truth," Hall insisted. "I came here to offer to pay you to recover the secret for me. I'll give you ten thousand dollars if you can get it for me."

"Everybody wants to pay me for that," Shayne said. "If I had it, I could auction it off—and considering it's supposed to show the way to a million, I think I could get a lot better bid than yours."

"I'll pay whatever you want," said Hall.

"I'm already working for Marshall Cone," Shayne said. "His bid comes first if there's any bidding to be done. Besides, you've given me no reason to believe any part of your story yet."

"You've *got* to believe me. I'm telling you the truth." Hall got up and crossed to the water cooler with his empty brandy glass in hand.

The shot—undoubtedly fired from the roof of the building across Flagler Street—smashed the window of Shayne's office, narrowly missed both Hall and

the water cooler and thudded into the wall.

Hall dropped to the floor and half-crawled, half-scrambled back to the area of the desk. Shayne knew he couldn't be seen through that window. He also knew there was no chance at all of spotting—let alone chasing—the sniper. He stayed where he was.

"Now will you believe me?" said Hall from the floor. He was sweating from fear, exertion or both.

"I don't know," Shayne said. "Whoever fired that shot couldn't tell which of us it was through the window. He was probably trying to kill *me*."

"Oh hell!" Hall said.

"My sentiments exactly," Shayne replied. He switched off his desk light and left the office in darkness. "You get on out the back of the building. I'll think about what you said and let you know when I make up my mind."

"And when will that be?" Hall said as he got up off the floor.

"Probably not till I find what you're all after," Shayne said. "Then I'll have solved the case and I'll know whom to believe. On the move. I've got a lot of work still to do tonight."

Shayne meant what he said. He had taken the shot through his office window a good deal

more seriously than he wanted to reveal to the lookalike partner of Marshall Cone and Associates.

He hadn't been joking when he said that the sniper was trying to get him, not Jack Hall. If not that shot, then the next would be meant for the big detective. Somebody wanted that key in his pocket—wanted it badly enough to kill.

He wondered whether to believe Hall—or had it all been an elaborate bluff to throw him off the track. Certainly the shot hadn't been any bluff. It had come from a real gun. From Hall's reaction, it had been none of his doing. A plan for bringing the case to a head began to take shape in Shayne's mind. He had the lever to move all the actors in the key he had taken from the license plate of the dead woman's wrecked and ruined car.

IX

HIS NEXT STEP was to keep the appointment Isabel Parsons had made with him earlier in the day. Shayne sat quietly in his darkened office, waiting for it to get late enough for him to join her at her friend's apartment.

As he expected, whoever had fired the shot through his window made no attempt to follow

up or investigate its effects. Absence of police or ambulance would have told him he had missed. Or, perhaps, he didn't really care.

After a while Mike Shayne locked up and left the building. He got his car from the nearby parking garage and drove over to Miami Beach. He made no attempt to be evasive—and so was not surprised when he spotted a small red foreign car following a block behind him in the traffic. Again he let it stay on his tail.

Once on the Beach, he took some evasive maneuvers. He might have shaken off the tail, but he didn't much care. He parked a couple of blocks from the address Isabel Parsons had given and walked the rest of the way. This time he was careful not to be tailed. He wanted the follower to know approximately, but not exactly, where he was.

Isabel Parsons was waiting for him when he let himself into the apartment. She had a soft light on in the living room and a portable bar ready for him. When he checked the apartment, he noted that she also had the rear door in the kitchen locked and bolted and a chair wedged under the knob. Nobody was hiding in any of the closets.

"You're a careful man." She

laughed at him when he came back into the living room.

"I like staying alive."

He went over to the bar. There was a lone bottle of Martell in with the scotch, gin and rum. He poured some into a tumbler. He noted with approval that she had drawn the heavy drapes across the windows.

"You're careful yourself," he said.

"I like staying alive, too," Isabel Parsons said. "I like being alive, and I like a million dollars, too. What do you think of that?"

"You mean to say Peter didn't leave you a million?"

"Peter Parsons had sixty dollars in his pocket when he died," she said. "He had less than that in his bank account. The million he left is the million you're going to help me get from Marshall Cone."

Shayne drank some of his brandy and followed it with a sip of water from the carafe on the bar. He smiled at her over the rim of the glass.

It worried her. She came and stood so close to him that he could smell the seductive perfume she wore and all but feel the warmth radiating from her body.

"You are going to get the million for us, Mike," Isabel Parsons said in a voice which

promised as much as it questioned. "You have to, you know."

"I'll be honest," Shayne said, "I don't know what I'm going to do about that million."

She said, "Damn you!" and meant it.

"Hold on," Shayne said. "Let me finish. Marshall Cone hired me to do two jobs. One was to find out who killed his wife. I think I know that now. I really think she killed herself as the police think."

"The second job was to find out who had made the big ripoff. I mean to do that for him, too."

She said, "Damn you!" again.

"Hold on," Shayne repeated. "He hired me to find out who stole the money. He didn't say anything about recovering it for him. That isn't a part of my contract."

He drank some more brandy. She was standing so close that her eyes were barely a foot from his. She looked right at him and began to smile.

"I begin to see," she said. "Oh, lover, I knew you wouldn't let us down."

She was drinking rum and put back her head and emptied her glass with one long swallow.

"Hold on," Mike Shayne said for the third time. "Be careful you don't see too all-fired much

while you're about it. I didn't say I'd split the million with you. I didn't say I'd get it for you or even help you get it. All I said was I wouldn't stop you if you take it away from Marshall Cone. That's all."

"That's enough," she said and swayed forward and kissed the big man full on the mouth.

Mike Shayne pushed the excited woman away from him. It wasn't the easiest thing he'd ever made himself do, but he did it.

"You jump to too many conclusions," he said. "You're way ahead of me. I said I wouldn't stop you if you could get Cone to pay you for whatever information you have. That's absolutely all."

"I don't know whether what you've got is worth a million dollars—or thirty-five cents for that matter. I don't know if Cone *can* pay you, or if he'd even consider it. I intend to wind up my part of this case—and let the chips fall where they may as far as the rest of you are concerned."

She walked away, then turned to look back at him. "As long as you're not *against* me, Mike," she said. "As long as you're not *against* me. . ."

"I'm not against you," Shayne said. "As long as you get it straight, that that's all. Now you're going to have to tell me

what you have that's worth—or that you think is worth—a million dollars."

"I have information Peter got the day before he was shot. It's a letter addressed to Clarice Cone at the Cone's home. I don't know if he found it by accident, but I think not. I think he'd been watching their mail for some time. It would have been easy enough. The mail was put in a lobby mailbox while both of them were at the office. Anybody can pick that sort of lock. All he had to do was look at the mail and put it back. This time he photographed the letter—at least part of it—put it back in the envelope, and put that in the mailbox."

She paused and poured herself another drink. "Damn Peter, anyway!" she said and tossed off the drink in a single gulp.

"What do you mean by that?" Mike Shayne asked.

"He wasn't much of a spy," Isabel said. "When you come right down to it, Peter wasn't very much of an anything. He got most the letter, though—enough of it, if Marshall doesn't have the original."

"You think he doesn't?"

"I *know* he doesn't, Mike. If he had it, he'd never have called you in. No, I'm sure Clarice read it and destroyed it."

"What was in it?" Shayne asked.

"It was from a Swiss attorney. It said he had had what he called 'discreet' inquiries made. As she'd expected, an account had been opened at the bank she had asked about. It was a numbered account in the amount of between one and two million American dollars. It could be used by anyone having the right number and that would include Madame or Madame's bon ami—in other words Clarice or her lover. So what do you think that might be worth?"

"I think it tells me what I need to know," Shayne said. "What was the name of the bank?"

"The letter didn't say—and Peter fouled up the photo as I said. He got the lawyer's signature but missed the top of the page where the firm name would be printed."

"That isn't important," Mike Shayne said. "The name could be traced easily enough. I think you're asking too much for what you have, though."

"I don't," she said heatedly.

"Well," Shayne said. "I think I can arrange a chance for you to find out—and before this night is much older."

Shayne got busy on the phone. He called Marshall Cone and each of his surviving junior



partners. He told each of them substantially the same thing.

"I believe I have all the information I need to solve this case. I want all of you present when I reveal it. Come right over to this address. . ."

X

MARSHALL CONE was the first to arrive. He carried a black briefcase. When he saw Isabel Parsons, he jumped.

"Your fourth partner couldn't be here," Shayne explained, "so I asked his widow instead. After all, whatever interest he has in this will go to her when it's wound up."

"Whatever interest Peter Parsons may have had in the firm didn't amount to a hoot in hell," Cone said.

"Somebody thought it was important enough to kill him for it," Shayne reminded the head of the firm.

"Whoever did was a damned fool," Cone flared back. "If there was one genuine nothing in this firm, it was Peter Parsons. He had the smallest territory of any of us, and he couldn't make it pay. If the West Africa take hadn't risen in the next few months, I was going to buy Parsons out of the firm and put somebody in charge who could cut the mustard."

"That's interesting, in view of what happened to Mr. Parsons," Mike Shayne said. "Where were you at the time he was shot?"

Marshall Cone jumped as if someone had prodded him with a cattle goad. "Oh come off it, Shayne! You know I was right in my office where you left me. Besides, I wouldn't have had to shoot Parsons to get rid of him. Isabel will tell you he was so deep in debt he'd have grabbed at any offer I made. Go ahead—tell him Isabel."

Isabel didn't have a chance. The doorbell rang, and when Shayne opened it Paul Green was on the step.

The partner in charge of Indonesia was as cool and saturnine as he had been in the office earlier that day. There wasn't a black hair out of place on his head. He looked at his boss, said, "Hello, Isabel—hello Shayne," then went to the portable bar to mix himself a scotch and soda.

Then he turned and said to the detective, "I suppose this midnight rendezvous means you've got some results to show for it."

"That's right. I think I have the answers you people wanted from me."

Paul Green surprised the big detective by his next observation. "In that case, you can show us some evidence, can't

you? Knowledge is little without proof. You *do* have evidence of course, old man?"

There could have been menace in his steely tones. The black eyes bored right into Shayne's. The big man gave him back gaze for gaze.

"It's my *business* to prove things, Mr. Green."

"Then fire ahead and let's get it over with."

"As soon as Mr. Hall arrives," Shayne said.

They hadn't long to wait. The doorbell rang within minutes. Jack Hall was sweating from the heat outside—also, in Mike Shayne's opinion, from nerves. He did his best to show no emotion, and greeted Isabel and his partners calmly.

"Now we can get going," Shayne said.

The big detective had pulled the round dining table in the apartment out of the alcove where it usually sat into the center of the living room under the ceiling light. Now he pulled up chairs for each of them around the table and waited till they all sat down.

"This hasn't been the simplest case I ever worked on," Shayne said to them. "Right from the beginning, it's been complicated—and more so as it went on.

"At the start, I was asked to solve two questions. The first

was the death of Mrs. Cone, and even that was a double problem. One—was she murdered? Two—in that case who killed her?

"The second job was bound up with the first, but it was still a separate problem. Who had recently stolen very large sums of money from the firm?

"Before I had time to start on either of these problems I was presented with a third. The death of Peter Parsons. There was no doubt at all about this one being a murder. It was murder one—cold blooded, planned, almost impossible to solve. A shooting in the middle of a crowd in broad daylight leaves no clues for the police."

He paused to light a cigaret, blew the smoke towards the center of the table where it was pulled up by the heat of the overhead light.

"Well?" said Marshall Cone impatiently.

They were all watching him intently.

"There were other factors," Shayne said. "I learned that Mrs. Cone had a lover. A shot was fired into my office. Someone—I'm sure it was one of you—wanted to hold up the rest for a million dollars in exchange for information. Someone tore apart the car in which Mrs. Cone died.

"That someone didn't find

what he was after—I found it.”

Shayne saw the shock hit them all.

“Everybody wanted that object,” Shayne said. “You didn’t all say so, but it was obvious. From your reactions and from the nature of the object itself, I knew that it held the solution to all of the questions.”

He paused again.

“My God!” Marshall Cone burst out. “What *was* it?”

“Yes, tell us,” said Paul Green.

“I’ll do better than tell you,” Mike Shayne said. “I’ll show you. Here!”

He took the plastic envelope contained the three locker keys out of his pocket, added, “This was taped to the license plate of Mrs. Cone’s car when it went into the canal.”

He shook out the three keys onto the table where they could all examine them one by one. Marshall Cone took a quick look at them, then pushed them on. Paul Green picked them up one by one and ran his thumb lightly over both flats of each key. He read the scratched numerals carefully, as if trying to memorize them. Then he passed them on.

Jack Hall also picked up all three keys separately and read the numerals. Shayne could detect the exact moment when he realized that one set was the

reverse order of the other one.

Isabel Parsons gave the keys only a casual glance before passing them back to Shayne. She didn’t pick up or turn over any of them.

Shayne said, “Thanks. Now I know the answer to *all* the questions.”

It was like dropping a bomb in the room.

“This is the story,” Shayne said. “Each of you knows some of it to be true. I’ll lay it out now for all of you.

“The secret is greed. All of you were stealing from each other. You all knew that. Somebody was stealing very big indeed.

“Actually it wasn’t *one* of you who was stealing big. It was *two*. Marshall Cone had the best opportunity. He had more than a million dollars stashed away in a numbered Swiss bank account.

“Clarice Cone knew about that. Until a few days ago she didn’t know the number of the account. She knew all the rest. The day she died, she found where her husband had hidden the number.”

Shayne paused again and relit his cigaret, which had gone out, then said, “Clarice needed that number because she had a lover. Her lover was the other partner who was stealing big. Not as big as Marshall—but big

enough so Marshall was beginning to catch on. He was the one I was supposed to find.

"Clarice and her lover had planned to fly to Berne the evening of the day she died. They planned to clean out Marshall Cone's account, add it to their own take and never come back to Miami."

"I didn't kill her," Cone burst in. "If you think I found out and followed her and killed her, you're very wrong."

"I know that," Shayne said. "Nobody killed her but maybe guilt and fear. She was afraid you might follow. I think that's why she scratched the account number on one of the keys and taped it to the rear plate. She was excited and going too fast. Her death was an accident as the police said."

"It exploded the whole can of worms, though. Her lover probably thought she had double-crossed him and gone off alone—till the body was found. Peter Parsons must have thought the same thing. Peter knew about the lover and the Swiss account. He was getting close to the truth, but he was killed first."

"You, Mr. Cone, must have begun to suspect what your wife had been up to. You called me in in the hope I'd pin her death on her lover."

"Who killed Parsons?" Cone

said. "That had to be my wife's lover. Find him, and you've got the killer."

"Not at all," Shayne said. "I know who he is and he had no motive to kill Parsons. He and Clarice would be long gone before Peter could make trouble. He was too smart to run with a murder one rap on his tail. Isn't that right, Green?"

All eyes were on the big dark partner.

"That's right," Paul Green said. "If Clarice and I had met, we'd have had it made. With her dead, I couldn't touch that Swiss account anyway."

"I figured that," Shayne said. "You gave me final proof when you fingered the keys right now. Clarice told you on the phone how she covered the numbers with grease. The greasy key told you all you want to know."

"Then *who*?" said Marshall Cone.

"Who's left?" Shayne asked. "Jack Hall. Clarice wasn't the only wife with a lover. Hall and Isabel Parsons were a team, too. They wanted that Swiss account and they'd found out almost enough to get it. When Clarice went into the canal, they saw their chance."

"Hall searched the car, but didn't find the key. I did. He killed Peter Parsons because Peter was finding out too much."

He and Isabel were afraid to trust Peter alive any more.

"Then Hall came to my office and claimed to be Clarice's lover in the hope I'd give him the key. To make his story plausible, he had Isabel fire a shot through the window. It didn't work."

"What now?" Marshall Cone asked.

Shayne took the big Colt forty-five out of its belt holster and put it on the table.

"Now we pick up the pieces," he said. "Isabel may want to sell you more proof of what I've said. Some of you might want to sue each other or bring crim-

inal charges on the thefts from the firm. I don't care about any of that."

"Damn you!" Isabel Parsons said.

Mike Shayne ignored her. "There's one thing I *do* care about," he said. "Peter Parsons was murdered. Mr. Cone, I suggest you pick up the phone and call the Miami Beach police. We'll all have to sit quietly and wait till they come. I think they'll find Jack Hall has the gun that killed Parsons. We'll just have to wait and see."

The police arrived in under ten minutes. . . .



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THE HAMMERING thudded through my sleep like the caresses of a spiked blackjack. I opened my eyes and winced when the early morning sun stabbed at my retinas with actinic darts. I kicked off the covers and stumbled to the door of the old farmhouse while artillery shells exploded inside my

skull. Usually I awoke bright, cheery and alert. Not this morning.

Lande Hale the county sheriff, was doing all the pounding. My eyes said there were two of him. I knew better. Stetville could contain only one person with a granite face and jaws the dimensions of a ham hock, all of which was topped by a rakishly-tilted Smokey Bear hat. And Lande was it. I didn't care.

"Morning," I muttered groggily, vaguely pleased my efforts at speaking were so successful. My brains were still too scrambled to wonder why Lande had come so early. Or why he had come at all.

Lande stared at me with beady brown eyes and I suppose he was estimating my hangover to the drop. I wondered too. I hadn't *had* a drop, except for beer. But I had a hangover, the kind that's instant brain concussion. A nearby bluejay squawked with spring enthusiasm and when I recovered I hated all bluejays for life.

"Suppose I drop in for a while," Lande said. It may have been a question, but not one you say "no" to. Lande's tone, and the fact he was in full uniform meant official business. That much registered through the hazy view of life I had.

Lande sat at the long wooden

table in my kitchen-living room and took off his hat, showing remnants of grey hair combed back in slick, thin wisps. A huge belly sagged over the wide Sam Browne belt of his sheriff's outfit. He unbuttoned his jacket and fished out a long, thin cigar from his shirt pocket. He lit up and the first plume of smoke metamorphosized into a stationary, roiling smoke circle a foot or so from his face. Of all the things not on my mind I wondered how he got that circle to skid to a stop just there.

"Had a big fire last night Randy" Lande said. His voice was surprisingly mellow, as though a giant bull might bleat instead of roar.

"Where?" I asked as I put on water to boil and groped for the coffee can. I got it on only the second try and heaped grounds into the coffee pot. No junkie craved his morning wake-up shot more than I wanted coffee.

"Doc Hastings' house," he answered.

That woke me up a bit faster. Doc, not surprisingly, was the town physician, gruff but generally liked. He was even efficient, and that was a lot from an old-time, small-town, widower-sawbones.

"Sorry about that, Lande," I said with as much sincerity as I could feel for anything right then. I glanced at the water

and willed it to boil. "How'd it happen?" I asked, watching some small bubbles rise.

"Doc was in Albany about eight-thirty, giving a talk, as he told me," Lande began. "Fire started about then." I could hear, rather than see, Lande take a long puff on his cigar. Gratefully I poured boiling water into coffee and sat down. Resurrection was only minutes away.

Lande looked at me and, as though continuing an uninterrupted thought, spoke again. "Someone set it."

That was a shock and helped wake me up even more. "Who'd do that? What for?" I asked in a rush, even forgetting about my head.

Lande tapped the end of his cigar against an ash tray and came to the point of his pounding. "Some evidence points to you," he said evenly and without emotion, peering at me from under eyebrows that resembled two Fuller brushes.

The fact that his visit was connected with the fire had filtered through. But I needed a dayful of sleep to handle a jolt like this. I raced for the coffee pot and poured out two cups worth, one for Lande.

"Whatever you have is wrong," I said after a few gulps. "I was here all last night. I just got up." I hoped we could clear

up whatever the mistake was in a hurry. I needed to warm that bed again.

"Maybe so, but there's this, for one thing," Lande replied, opening a paper bag beside him on the bench. He thumped a plaster cast of a footprint on the table. "Doc found a print under his back window and made the cast. Checks with a tread of your bootprints in the front yard. Pressed one in the ground before I came in."

The cast was surprisingly light and the tread showed clean, sharp and clear. I had bought new boots at the town's general store just a few days ago. Millie—the clerk—took a lot of time making sure I got just the right fit.

"Checked with Millie a while ago to see who might have bought boots lately. She mentioned you. Now," Lande added judiciously, "she has sold other pairs."

"Well then," I said, lunging for the weak point, "anyone who bought a pair could have—"

"But none in your size. They just got that stock in and the tread is pretty unique."

I gulped down more coffee, the first shadow of numbing fear beginning to replace my annoyance. I knew that print was poor evidence, but somehow getting back to bed seemed

fractionally more remote than a few minute before.

"What else you got Lande?" I asked, not all that politely.

"Use your car last night, Randy?"

"No," I answered, more defensively than I wanted. "And I can prove it. I drove straight to the back of the house last night. You can see the tracks. One set. How's that?" I added.

A faint whisper of curiosity crossed Lande's stolid expression, although it was hard to say which piece of granite moved. Maybe his eyes just glittered a little more. "Would help some if there was only one set," he said.

"Well then see for yourself," I answered, leading him to the rear of the house. My car was in back. So were three sets of tire tracks, clear in earth made soft by Spring showers.

One set for when I parked it. One for when it moved out. Another for when it returned.

My stomach began clawing my insides as I counted those tracks over and over again. Lande scratched the rubble of his face with a knuckle. "Took a look back here before waking you," he explained quietly.

Back in the house, Lande stayed standing.

"But I was *here*, all last night, *dammit!*" I suddenly shouted, squelching hysteria as

best I could. Even coffee wouldn't help at this point.

"Randy, Doc told me about—well, your troubles. I guess you aren't to blame much. Doc said he'd like to keep this kind of quiet. And I will, much as I can."

I knew what Lande meant. I had come to Stetville after a sideswipe had sent me into a concrete pillar on a New York Thruway. Two dead—wife and kid—with one survivor—me. Blackouts, a day or more at a time, followed. The specialist I visited suggested breaking all familiar associations as the cheap therapy. I had returned to the old farmhouse I had grown up in and inherited, with as much freelance work as a medical computer programmer from my old firm as I wanted. I saw Doc once a month for a checkup. He knew about the problem. Hell, I had just seen him yesterday.

"I was *here*," I repeated, not believing it myself. Lande certainly didn't. I tried to dredge up a memory of when I might have moved out my car last night. Nothing. There never had been.

Lande lit up his cigar again. "Know Ellie Hays, Randy?"

I nodded, surprised. Sure I knew Ellie Hays—Doc's nurse.

"Doc called Ellie at eight last night, so I understand. Just be-

fore he spoke at that Albany medical conference. He asked her to see how you were doing with that medicine he gave you."

Lande paused, letting out a long plume of smoke. For no reason whatsoever, I wondered if Lande only blew out one circle per cigar.

"Ellie says she called you at eight-thirty," Lande continued. "No one answered. You *weren't* here Randy."

A sense of total desperation rolled through me, bleaching out any hopes of a rational, plausible excuse for Doc's house. I had never slept so soundly that I didn't hear the phone. A blackout. And this time I had done something serious.

"There's a phone call that says you weren't here," Lande intoned and already I could picture him before a jury. "Then, there's a footprint that says where you were likely to be. And finally there's those tire tracks that say you went someplace. Maybe something'll turn up to show you didn't do it Randy. But all those facts together say I've got to arrest you." His words had the finality of a jail door clanking shut.

The arraignment took place in Justice of the Peace Woostan's office, with my mood such that Waterloo would seem like

a Roman carnival. Doc had already called Woostan and, along with Lande's recommendation, I was let out on my own recognizance—with mental incompetence and lack of criminal intent as the reasons.

Those blackouts. . . I had been told that I'd done strange things. But nothing this serious. At home, I stared out the big bay window overlooking my pond below. I mulled over yesterday's events, desperately wanting to discover *why* I had burned down Doc's house, as though motive would ease guilt. I didn't doubt that I had done it. But I wanted to know why.

Yesterday. . .

An early afternoon call from Ted Lelar, an engineer friend, to ask if I could help shovel a load of gravel for the floor of his new garage. I had put on dungarees and the new boots recently fitted by Mildred and gone over to heave a ton or so of gravel. After a few beers with Ted, I had gone to my monthly visit with Doc.

His office in the Stetville Medical Center was crowded and during the half-hour wait I thought how different the antiseptic center was from Doc's house. I had actually dropped by there just a week before and been surprised at the threadbare look.

His study was plain and di-

sheveled, and Doc matched the conditions with a haggard look and a grey stubble of beard covering the lower half of a long thin face. The chairs were torn, the paint peeling, the only picture on the wall hung crooked. About the only thing of value in his study was an old grandfather clock that ticked loudly and chimed on the hour.

I had gone to ask a question about a medical computer program, but Doc had warned that he expected a patient. That and the fact he seemed preoccupied ended our conversation. I had left soon after coming, bumping into a man who resembled a tank on stilts. I idly recalled that his face seemed lopsided, as though one half had been folded off center at birth. I was surprised he was a patient. He seemed tough enough to eat germs and like it.

Just then Ellie Hays, the nurse, had interrupted my reveries and ushered me into Doc's office. When he asked how I was feeling, I replied, "Fine," and meant it. Memories of screeching tires, the rip of steel, crashing glass and a deadly silence followed by low, short-lived moans were fading.

But after the thumping, blood pressure, stethoscope listening, and everything else doctors do, a worried frown had covered Doc's face. "Blood pressure's

high now, Randy," Doc reported. "And the pulse is more irregular than I'd like to see," he added solemnly. We both knew what that meant. Those were the physical symptoms that often accompanied a blackout. I can't say I wasn't warned.

Doc had gone into a small, adjoining room, stayed a while and come out with a small box. "One of what's inside before each meal, starting tonight. Something that'll regulate pulse and blood pressure, both," he told me. Just then the intercom had sounded and Ellie Hays' excited voice announced a compound fracture case.

"Damn!" Doc muttered, his face wan and grey. "I'll have to set this one and those casts are always a messy job."

I left, passing a groaning farmer on the way, a bloody right arm held by his left and aided by a field hand. He had leapfrogged a whole officeful of patients. But everybody was being too glad the arm belonged to someone else to mind.

Yesterday—what else?

Nothing else. I had done some shopping at the general store and driven home, parking the car in back of the house. I had intended to wash off the winter muck, salt and mud but postponed the idea when visions of a steak reminded me I

was starving. I followed Doc's advice, made dinner and then went to bed not long after—relaxed, tired and sleepy.

The next thing I clearly remembered was Lande Hale pounding at the door and a head that would have felled Gargantua. That was just this morning. *This* morning. Arrested and arraigned. Now staring out a big bay window. Stetville—a dream turned nightmare.

My nerves screamed for something to do. I remembered that I hadn't washed down the car yesterday. Hell, why not now? It would be something to occupy my mind.

The job took 15 minutes and then, leaning against the hood, I wondered how else to fill in heavy time. My eyes caught the sharp herringbone battens of my boots in the soft ground. That pattern, a unique pattern, was what had led Lande Hale to my door. Those bootprints. . .

An adrenalin shock hit me like a punch in the solar plexus. I knelt and took a close look at one of the prints. I stared at it for a long time. Then, with relief bordering on collapse, I went into the house, poured out a generous shot of bourbon, added ice, sat in the softest chair in the county and celebrated.

I hadn't set that fire. And I

hadn't blacked out. The plaster cast Lande had thumped on the table was clean, not an imperfection in the tread line. But yesterday *afternoon* I had helped Ted Lelar shovel some gravel. My bootprints near the car clearly showed where pebbles had stuck between the treads. The print under Doc's house didn't. But it should have if I had set a fire that *night*.

All accusations were false—including those I had made against myself. I was too relieved to think about inconsequentials like a trial, sentence, personal disgrace, loss of friends and a reputation as an unpredictable firebug. That euphoria lasted for about a minute. Then I got greedy. I didn't want to pay for that fire, mistake or not.

Mistake?

I sipped on the bourbon slowly as a sly, unpleasant thought began to nip at me. Three sets of tire tracks? A phone call I didn't hear? A footprint I didn't make?

Mistake?

Hell, no! I had been set up.

I chewed over yesterday's events in no particular order, a rising anger goading me on. The shadows on the pond lengthened and turned purple. A flock of barn sparrows darted over the water, periodically dive bombing the surface to

pluck out an aquatic insect. That bluejay squawked again and from the back of the house I heard the fainter squawk that heralded little bluejays to come.

Just about then a chill ran up my back, spread to my back and pricked at my scalp as though ice cubes were dancing over me. I remembered a chance remark that pointed to an idea almost too improbable to be true.

Almost, because I'd believe anything at that point. My training as a computer programmer helped to juggle mentally the facts I knew, like filling in blank spaces of a three dimensional crossword puzzle. Before long, one scenario began to flesh out. Odd, apparently irrelevant details came to mind and filled in more spaces. Within the hour, almost every blank was completed and I knew—overall—how I had been framed, by whom and for what motive. If I were correct, it would let me off free and clear. I bought it.

Would Lande?

I spent the next ten minutes figuring ways to check out what were now—for all practical purposes—hunches. I came up with several, more than I had anticipated. The frame was clever, but it had been an act of desperation, not deliberation. It had been too fast to tie all the

facets in one tight knot. And—as that incisive saying goes—loose knots come apart most easily.

One course to check with was the least likely to prove worthwhile but the easiest to try. I decided to warm up with that one. By now, the sky overhead was a deep cerulean and a pristine, sparkling Venus heralded the night to come. The birds were gone, replaced by the chirp of crickets and the first Spring croaks of horny bullfrogs. I got up, took a well-earned stretch, flipped on the lights and headed for the telephone.

I handled the call as suavely as a method actor. I slipped in the question I really wanted to ask as an afterthought. And, in a wide, thick stroke of beginner's luck I got a long-winded, jackpot answer that was as solid a fact as Lande's heart wanted. When I hung up, I couldn't help but admire the mathematical precision of the frame.

Now I needed something else—sleep. It had been a rough day. But first I called Lande and asked if I could see him in the morning. It turned out he and Doc were driving to the county seat that next morning to fill out some formal complaints. Lande reluctantly said he'd pass by. I suppose he



wasn't overlooking the chance I'd add something for the record—like a full confession. The fact that Doc was coming too was okay with me. Hell, it had been his house that was cremated.

The next morning, I awoke bright, cheery, and alert. Coffee was made when they arrived and, following an almost in-violate rural ritual Lande, Doc,

and I sipped politely before par-laying.

Doc's long, thin face showed lines of fatigue. He wore a jacket and tie and seemed thinner and less substantial than I remembered. More than anything, he looked like an elegant, elderly scarecrow with nicely combed white hair. Only his lapis lazuli eyes remained vibrant and alive and I read impatience in them when he looked at me. He must have been exhausted and I didn't wonder. It's a real drag to have your house burned out from under you.

The silence got pretty oppressive with only sounds of coffee being lapped up and I decided to make my pitch. I'll be damned if I knew exactly how to begin.

"It's about the fire," I said lamely.

"I guessed that," Lande said acidly.

"I didn't do it," I said.

Lande sighed with disappointment. Doc sipped again on his coffee and looked bored. "Guessed you might say something like that Randy. Best get to the point." Lande's tone showed that he doubted there was much of a point.

"Well, maybe you'd like to know who did set the fire?" I asked. Now it was Lande's turn to look bored. I don't know how

he did it. Not a muscle so much as twitched on his face.

"The point, Randy," Lande said, overt impatience showing.

"Doc set it," I said. "He framed me."

Doc's coffee cup crashed to his saucer and he looked at me pityingly. "Randy, you've been ill. Maybe you're not entirely responsible. But no one else is to blame." Doc showed a lot of control and I wondered if Actor's Studio had given correspondence courses. A hidden doubt I might be able to bring this off after all rose like Boris Karloff from his Gothic grave.

"Let's hear it, Randy, but make it quick. We've got lots to do." Lande grunted as his bulk moved to one side. He pulled out a black covered report pad from his hip pocket. It must have been a reflex action, because he didn't write a thing in it.

"I visited Doc in his office day before yesterday and he gave me some pills for blood pressure and heart rate. They were knockouts—strong ones," I began. I remembered last morning's headache with malice. "That's why I was so groggy yesterday morning when you came, Lande."

Except for my mouth nothing moved. "After I was asleep Doc dropped by. He made those sets of tire tracks as well as a plas-

ter cast of a bootprint in my front yard. Not all that many people have plaster of Paris around. Doc was going to set a broken arm and I remembered he'd have some. That's what got me to thinking he might have had something to do with the fire himself."

Lande reached for his shirt pocket, took out a cigar and lit up. A cloud of smoke from his first puff bubbled in front of his face, then turned into a stationary circle about two feet away. Okay, now I knew. One circle per cigar, but that was a poor consolation prize for the fact Lande wasn't buying this story—so far.

"Then Doc went home, pressed a print under his window, called Ellie Hays to call me, set his house on fire, and went to that conference in Albany." It was a long sentence but I hoped it set the stage for what was coming.

I saw Doc's eyes boring into me and I swear he might have committed murder just then. I didn't mention the bootprints and the indentations made by the pebbles. Lande would think I put the pebbles in the treads and stomped around my own backyard to make an alibi. Besides, I didn't have to mention those prints.

"That's a *lot* of supposin'," Lande said, tossing off my

reasoning as a good try. "And we're still in a hurry. There's no proof of what you say, first off. And, there's no reason for Doc to fire up his own house." Lande took another slurp of coffee, preparatory to leaving. He wanted concrete evidence, not suppositions—and I gave him another guess before he could rise from the table.

But it was a good, solid guess—one bordering on absolute certainty. I had remembered—during the time I fitted a scenario together—the guy I had bumped into when leaving Doc's house. He had the look I remembered from the city, the hard, determined face of a collection agent. Then, there was the fact that Doc was broke—his house was evidence of that—despite a flourishing practice.

I had first thought of drugs, but Doc was too alert. The next idea fitted. Doc: a chronic, late blooming, full fledged, go-for-broke, down at the heels, compulsive gambler—an addiction as financially destructive as terminal cancer. I'd already seen it strike rich and poor, young and old alike.

Motive?

"Money," I said to Lande. "Doc set that house for insurance. But you needed a fall guy, Doc," I said, looking straight at him. "Without a

patsy the insurance company would have checked your finances. And I'll bet they're a mess and they wouldn't have paid off. It's a guess, but it's easy to check out, don't forget." This was one idea I hadn't needed to look into—thanks to that call I'd made.

Doc's face became the color of dry ashes. One of his hands began to tremble and he lowered it into his lap. Lande looked straight ahead, balancing what I had said on his plausibility scale. Then Doc spoke.

"Lande, I've got some patients to take care of," he said imperiously. "People in town count on me and I've got patient appointments this afternoon. I'd like to leave now." His voice carried the perfect proportions of solicitous calm modulated with a touch of indignation.

And Lande, damn him, bit. "That's still a lot of supposin' Randy. And we're still kind of busy," he said in a tone usually reserved for habitual liars. The balance scale was clearly tipped in Doc's corner.

I had to rush a bit more than I wanted, but given Lande's doubts I had no choice. I looked at Doc again.

"You told Lande you called Ellie Hays from Albany at about eight, just before giving a talk to a medical meeting. Right, Doc?"

I held my breath for this one. Doc had told Lande just that. But if he thought quickly enough he might change his story. He didn't.

"To check on you, Randy. Side effects from that medication. There are more than you know of." Doc turned to Lande. "That's the kind of service I deliver to this town. And this is what I get."

He was convincing all right. I almost felt guilty about accusing him of setting his own house on fire. Until I realized that he must have planned to frame somebody for a long while. Then, the day before yesterday, everything clicked. He must have figured out the details during my examination and while getting those pills—not a bad scheme for the time he had. I must have been a Godsend. What better con than to frame a guy who'd actually believe he did the crime—the perfect patsy.

Lande blew out a plume of smoke and put his black notebook in his hip pocket. Doc's plea had got to him. I spoke and spoke fast.

"Doc didn't call his nurse from Albany, Lande. He called from his own house. I talked with Ellie Hays and she knows for sure. He was in his study at eight. He must have arrived late at that Albany meeting.

There'll be lots of people who remember. Doc never thought they'd be asked." Another weak link I didn't have to pry into.

Doc's other hand began to tremble. We both knew that Lande was asking himself what Doc would be doing in his own home fifteen minutes or so before the fire started and then lie about it."

"How could Ellie know Doc called her from his home?" Lande asked, getting right to the point.

"The chimes told her."

It took Doc a fleeting second to realize what I meant. Then a low, tremulous moan came from his mouth. He stared straight ahead, his face beginning to collapse like deliquescent clay.

Lande knew something was going on and I'll be damned if that black report book wasn't back on the table, as though by sleight of hand. "How about including me in this," he said with a touch of annoyance.

"The grandfather clock in Doc's study. Ellie remembers hearing the clock chime during Doc's call. It's something Doc has heard so often he wouldn't notice."

I didn't mention the stratagems I had used to steer the conversation to Doc's call. It had been more luck that Ellie was, at heart, a gossip with a gossip's instinct for fine detail.

Lande sucked on a tooth. In the quiet of the room it made an enormously loud, smacking noise. Doc sat there like a pale, alabaster statue. If he was seeing his future it must have been like looking into an endless tunnel of blackness.

"Why, Doc?" was all Lande asked.

Doc heaved out a wistful sigh that seemed to go back years. "Debts—stocks, bonds, quick investments. Some gambling on horses, then lots more. People *threatening* me." Doc spoke in a ragged, hoarse voice, too weary to say more than a few words at a time. He suddenly bent over, his face in his hands. His shoulders shook and when he sat up tears brimmed in his eyes, then overflowed. "A

lifetime—gone..." he muttered softly.

Lande stuffed his black report pad in his hip pocket once more. I hoped it was for the last time. "Best be going now," he said solicitously. He pushed himself up from the table. "Comin', Doc?" he asked in a tone tinged with regret. I wondered if Lande was thinking of the trouble it would be to get another town doctor as good as Hastings.

At the door, Lande paused with Doc moving like a stiff jointed robot in front of him. "Maybe we'll see you at the covered dish supper next week. Alice"—that was his wife—"is making a real good beef plate." It was the closest thing to an apology I'd ever got from a cop.

NEXT MONTH:

THE THREE MILLION DOLLAR COP

A Dramatic Long Novelet

by JERRY JACOBSON

When a load of confiscated narcotics vanishes from an elevator in the Public Safety Building, Detective Sam Leschi is caught in a murderous version of button, button, who's got the button with himself as prime target.

THE DAKAR DIAMOND CASE

The necklace, worth a cool quarter million, had vanished from the wall safe. All Noon needed was to solve its disappearance before the police could get into the act to kill his fee.



by Michael Avallone

IT WAS AN exorbitant looking layout. It had to be.

Donna Fox lived there. The very rich Donna Fox. Like many really loaded people, she had finally reached the stage where she needed a private detective. Somebody stole her pearls.

She had given me a hurry-up phone call, waving her bankbook. It was Labor Day evening and I shouldn't have been in the office at all. But Fox money talked loud and clear. Ditto the unseen

bankbook. So there I was ringing a white ivory buzzer on a fieldstone doorway that belonged somewhere in Connecticut instead of on Beekman Place.

The buzzer chimed something that would have been Beethoven's Tenth if he hadn't stopped at Nine.

A lovely brunette who reminded me of Linda Lovelace with a French mouth answered the door. She looked at me blankly for an instant and then her eyes warmed me over. She

Featuring

ED NOON



wore a white apron to indicate her household status.

"Are you the detective Miss Fox is expecting?"

"That's what it says on my license, Beautiful."

"Mr. Noon, come right in."

"Who are you?" I was only being friendly.

She held the door for me but her well plucked eyebrows arched derisively.

"You must be some detective." France gave way to New

York in one unrehearsed phrase. "I'm the maid."

"Do tell?" I was swallowed up in a foyer of marble that would have served Grand Central Station. "What kind of maid? Vivian—Shirley—Lucille?"

"Carlotta, if you must know." I had her smiling in spite of herself. "Come in here, please. This way."

She was reaching for my hat, a saucy trim figure with that piquant face, but I shook her off. "Thanks, I'll hang onto it. I'd feel lost without it. Lots of head colds going around. Which way to the main library?"

"Miss Fox said you were to wait for her in the study."

I followed her down the railroad terminal hall into the study. If I didn't know whose house I was in, I could have guessed. The evidence of great wealth was staggering. An atmosphere of Fort Knox fortified with Rembrandts, Utrillos and Modiglianis that certainly couldn't have been reproductions. A long line of oil portraits of the Fox family ran around the walls of the room, ending with Herself over the stone fireplace, as beautifully unreal as the Old Masters themselves.

I sat down on the long beige lounge and tried not to disappear into its immense depths. Carlotta was staring at me as if

I were a hippie dirtying up the furniture.

"Forget something, Carlotta?"

She shrugged round shoulders. "You can help yourself to a drink if you like. You'll find anything you need in the bar. I'll go tell Miss Fox you're here."

I showed her my reassuring smile.

"If you took the jewels, doll, give them back. You're too good looking to rot in jail."

She reddened in two seconds flat—something few females still do these cynical days. "You can't talk to me like that—"

"I'll behave. And I'll mix myself a drink. Go tell your boss I'm here."

"Ohhh!" With that original exit line, she stalked out of the study.

As soon as she disappeared, I mixed myself a fast Scotch on the rocks at the small bar located near the window facing the avenue. My eyes were casing the study through sheer force of habit. They found a lot to mull over. There was an Utrillo street scene tilted suggestively, revealing a semi-circle of grey steel that could only be a wall safe. I didn't go near it. I went to the Steinway piano catercornered in the other cove of the room.

I was faltering over the first five bars of *Blues In The Night*

when Donna Fox swept into the room.

Swept is right. It was Take One of a ten million dollar musical comedy opus with all the lights, composition and special effects exactly right.

The word for her was stunning. Pale blue evening dress, bold black eyes, mouth redder than a fire engine. Her worried and urgent attitude was right out of the script. She was breathless, beautiful and in trouble. It made you want to cry.

"Mr. Noon. So good of you to come quickly. I've been half out of my mind with worry. Can I fix you something? Oh, I see you've already discovered the bar." They teach them to talk like that at Bryn Mawr, complete with ladylike smile and a touch of go-to-hellishness. I controlled my radical complex and waved my glass at her.

"A pretty little maid named Carlotta pointed it out to me. How long has she been your maid?"

Donna Fox sat down on the lounge across from me. Her Great Lady demeanor was intact. You would have sworn I was painting her portrait. She practically matched the one on the wall as it was.

"Five years. But surely—Oh, good heavens! You don't suspect her already?"

"I'm a guy asking questions. Please don't jump the gun. I've never been here before—remember?"

She remembered. "I see what you mean, Mr. Noon." She reached a slender hand for a solid gold cigarette box. Naturally, she waited for me to light it for her. I did, using my own lighter. "Her name is Carlotta James. She is my maid and personal secretary when I need one. She came to New York from Boston in 71. She's a fine person and has some genuine culture that is all too rare these days. I think I'd almost trust her with my life."

"Boston? I would have said Brooklyn or Manhattan." I sipped the Scotch. "Those are Grade-A references. If I needed a secretary, I'd hire Carlotta too."

Donna Fox let ice drip over her polished tone.

"The situation doesn't call for levity. Please don't make jokes, Mr. Noon. I know of your reputation. I need your help. No more."

"Ouch! I pass."

"Thank you." She smiled, showing what a regular girl she was.

"Well, I'm here," I said. "You called me. You sounded worried. You still do. You can begin anyplace. I'm ready for all the details."

She passed a hand over her forehead. It was a pleasure watching her. She did all the female things so well.

"Oh, of course—the jewels. You'll want to hear about that, certainly. I assume you know enough about me. Lord knows, the newspapers have written me up—disgusting phrase that—often enough. The rich young socialite who has money by the square rod and loves to wear jewels. Very expensive, very unusual jewels. Well, why not?"

I scratched my nose. "It's rumored you could fill Van Cleef and Arpels with your personal loot."

"I could."

"And I *did* read something about the Dakar necklace recently. You paid a quarter of a million dollars for it."

"I did." She was enjoying her reputation immensely.

"And now you're going to tell me it's gone?"

"That is correct." Her pause was an actor's masterpiece. "Stolen. From the wall safe you see there." One carmine fingernail gleamed in the direction of the tipped Utrillo.

I nodded. "I'm not going to ask you about insurance or who or what you suspect. You talk and I'll listen."

Donna Fox inhaled on her cigarette and I noticed her



bosom for the first time. The blue dress set its undulations off marvelously well, but she was such a lady she kept you looking at her face. Which was the whole idea, I suppose.

"Mr. Noon, I went to the theater tonight—City Center Rival. *Brigadoon* It's always been a favorite show of mine and I must say it was a divine evening all around—to start with,

at least. My escort was Rodney Sykes. Rodney's my fiancé, and independently wealthy in his own right. I insert that remark to assure you that he can in no way be connected with the disappearance of the necklace.

"Poor darling! He didn't enjoy the performance at all. Had a beastly headache all night. Fact is, he's upstairs now in a guest room. I gave him some headache tablets. It's no fun to hear *Brigadoon* and have to keep spoiling your listening by making trips to the lounge to try to clear your mind."

"It certainly isn't. Go on."

"Well, the theater broke at eleven. Rod was feeling so down in the mouth we skipped going to *La Fonda Del Sol* for a midnight snack and came home. When I turned on the lights in here and saw the Utrillo—well, it was pretty obvious what had happened."

"Why didn't you call the police?"

"The publicity, Mr. Noon! Rodney's mother thinks I'm a hare-brained heiress as it is. And if the truth were known—"

I laughed. "I'm the soul of discretion, Miss Fox, not the heel."

Her eyes were amazed with me. "You've guessed already. I know you have. It's that alert look on your face. These sorts of things have a way of making

me seem sort of a character out of some crazy play or book. But Rodney's mother is terribly stuffy and proper and—"

"I read this somewhere before. History repeats itself."

"What can you do, Mr. Noon? I must have the necklace before the loss is discovered. The insurance people might not understand."

I drained the Scotch but I didn't go for a refill.

"The thief's going to need a fence. Unless, of course, he's somebody trying to embarrass you with Momma Sykes."

She scoffed at that, sneering in the grand manner. "Who would want to do such a thing? I haven't an enemy in the world!"

"Lincoln didn't either."

"Oh. . ."

I rose from the lounge, feeling the cushions hiss. "I'd like to see Rodney Sykes if I may. I'm great at curing headaches, and ring for Carlotta again. It's time I started playing detective."

She got up too. "Very well, Mr. Noon. But remember, Rodney Sykes is my fiancé, the man I love. I won't stand for his being bullied."

"I'll try and remember."

Before she could respond to that brilliant retort, there was a crash from the foyer. A barrel falling free down a stairway

sounds like that. I didn't wait for her. The commotion was thunderous.

I pounded out to the tiled hallway in time for an up-front seat. It was something out of an old time Marx Brothers movie.

A tall, thin man in elegant evening clothes was finishing up a wild tumble down the long staircase. He wound up in a pretzeled pratfall at the base of the stairs.

Behind me, Donna Fox shrieked. "Rodney! For God's sake!"

I TOLD CARLOTTA all about Rodney Sykes' fall from grace in the kitchen while I washed my hands. The jerk was lucky he hadn't broken his neck. There had been twenty-two steps going down. I counted.

Carlotta's Lovelace face was frightened.

"Is Mr. Sykes going to be all right?"

"I'm terribly afraid he'll live. Some corresponding bumps on his head and rear end."

"That's not a very nice thing to say."

I folded the hand towel over the rack provided for such items.

"It isn't. But he looks like a gigolo to me. Smells too pretty for a man."

She sniffed. "Don't you use after-shave lotion?"

"Yeah, I do. But not the kind that makes me smell like a house pet."

She ignored that. "What happened to him, anyway? I was in here when I heard him crash down the stairs."

"His headache." I sighed. "He got up to come downstairs but his head was still bothering him, and he's got a bad cold to boot. Running a little temperature, too. Anyway he missed the top step and now he's inside with his head on the richest lap in New York City."

"Thank God!" Carlotta blurted. "He could have been killed. What about the necklace, Mr. Noon? Any ideas at all?"

I encircled her waist with my right arm and leered. "Lots of them." I kissed her on the tip of the Lovelace nose before she squealed and jerked away from me.

"You—you—you..." There was obviously nothing low enough to call me.

"You'll think of something appropriate as soon as I leave. But I ask the questions, Carlotta, and sometimes I get the answers."

Her eyes blazed.

"You're not fooling me! You're suspicious of Mr. Sykes."

I laughed. "Jealous, that's all. All the women in this house seem concerned about dear

Rodney. Excuse me while I go make like a detective."

She turned her back on me in disgust. The view was nearly as good but I made no comment and headed for the living room.

Donna Fox was being a ministering angel to Rodney Sykes. I'd bandaged the jerk's head with a pocket handkerchief—his own—and let Donna find him the pills for his stomach to calm that and his nerves.

Sykes was lying back on the lounge, his eyes closed. His mouth was thin, almost lipless. He was having a field day being nursed by Donna. I could see that. A beautiful millionairess was the best of all patent medicines.

"Well, Rodney, how's the head?" The cheeriness in my voice would have sickened him if he'd known how I meant it.

"He'll be all right," Donna cooed softly. "He needs some rest. Perhaps you'd better come back tomorrow, Mr. Noon."

"Uh-uh," I said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The insurance company might come back tomorrow. Don't you want your missing necklace back?"

Rodney Sykes opened his eyes and strained erect. His eyes were that too-blue blue that makes for startling lucidity or watery nothing, depend-

ing on the head they're in. Sykes' eyes were meaningless.

"You heard Miss Fox," he barked. "Now be a good man and go."

"Later—but not now." Ignoring him, I moved over to the wall safe and tilted the painting. Then I stepped around to the baby grand, noticing for the first time the overturned can of furniture polish. A tiny pool of white waxy fluid had oozed from its neck and puddled up the top of the Steinway. I crouched, used my nose and poked around for a good two minutes.

Sykes' laugh was sarcastic.

"Get *him*! You're taking yourself pretty seriously, Sherlock."

Donna Fox was now genuinely irritated. "Really, Mr. Noon!"

"Sykes," I said. "Miss Fox is in big trouble. I'm trying to help her. This can't wait."

"Bravo. Have you deduced anything yet?"

I knew I wouldn't like him. "Why don't you sit there and worry about it?"

"Mr. Noon," Miss Fox began, "if you've discovered something, I have a right to know."

"I have. And while we're on the subject, how much is my time worth to you, Miss Fox?"

She was taken aback, but only for an instant. "I hadn't

given it much thought. I was so upset—"

"Think about it—*now!*"

She glared at me. "If you recover the Dakar—would one thousand dollars cover it?"

"*Donna!*" Sykes was dumbfounded. "Have you gone mad? Call the police and forget this two-bit Spillane character."

"Shut up, Rodney," I said evenly. "This is Miss Fox's party. A thousand will be fine, lady."

She nodded. "Well, then, what is it, Mr. Noon?"

"We don't need the cops," I said, "and we don't need any more time with this deal."

Sykes growled, "How about speaking a little plainer, Noon?"

"It couldn't be plainer, Rodney, old sock. This is an inside job. No burglars, no second story men, no visiting firemen."

Donna's black eyes *looked* baffled.

"What are you saying?"

I dug out my Kents. They watched my hands as if they expected me to do a magic trick.

"Call Carlotta, please," I said quietly.

"Carlotta?" Donna Fox repeated the name foolishly. "Why, that's ridiculous, Mr. Noon."

"Call her—*now!*"

Sykes bellowed his disgust.

"It's always the butler or the maid, eh, Noon? You're pathetic, you know that?"

Donna Fox, with an expression of disbelief on her lovely face, went to the bell cord and tugged it furiously.

I lit my Kent and waited.

"CARLOTTA, I've called you because Mr. Noon requested it."

I liked the way Donna Fox let Carlotta have it as soon as she came in. Linda Lovelace's lookalike looked from Miss Fox to Rodney Sykes to me in a slow pan that had innocence and naïveté written all over it. But like I said, the mouth was wrong. A gamine curl made her seem sullen.

"Yes, Mr. Noon?" Her eyes were a mite contemptuous of me, too.

"Where were you tonight when the robbery took place, Carlotta?"

"I went to the library. Why?"

I smiled. "Don't let me pick the answers out of you, Carlotta. Just tell us about tonight."

She shrugged. "Well, Miss Fox left with Mr. Sykes for the show at about seven. They had dinner here. I cleaned up. Let me see. It was about eight when I reached the library. I was bringing back *Something Of Value*. I was three days late with the book as it was. You

know, overdue. I left when the library closed."

"That would be nine o'clock?" I asked her.

"Yes. I got home about ten because I stopped for an ice cream soda at Whalen's. I came in here to finish waxing the piano and saw the wall and what had happened. I didn't know what to do."

Donna Fox murmured. "Poor dear! She was broken up and confused. When we got home, we found her crying. Then I called you, late as it was. Rod then went upstairs to sleep."

"Poor dear," I agreed. "Tell me, Miss Fox. When was the last time you saw the safe in its normal condition?"

"Why, it was before we left. We had a drink in the study and the picture was in its usual place. And the furniture polish on the piano. I was playing a few bars from *Brigadoon*. The can was upright then. The thief must have knocked it over."

"See here, Noon." The scene stealer, Rodney Sykes, was pushing forward, thin body, headache and all, to deal with me. "You're acting awfully high-handed. What *are* you getting at?"

"I'll tell you, Rodney, old pal." I froze him in his tracks with a toothy grimace. "Why don't you and Carlotta give Donna her necklace back before

the cops make everything nasty and ugly?"

Sykes shook his head. "This is rich."

"No, it isn't—*Donna* is. Remember?"

Carlotta cursed. It sounded like a curse. "I never heard of such a—"

"*Mister Noon!*" Donna Fox's voice rose above the medley. "Have you lost your mind?"

I turned to her. "Sorry, Donna. But they've got it all right. Ask them."

"Rodney, I'm sorry," she pleaded to her fiancé before she got back to me, her fingernails showing. "Mr. Noon, please leave if you're going to be insulting."

Rodney Sykes held up a hand almost as soft as hers. "Wait a moment. Before I throw you out on your ear, Noon, would you mind telling me what evidence your wild ideas are based on?"

"Rod," Donna said softly. "It isn't necessary to—"

I smiled. "It *is* necessary, lady, and I'll be glad to oblige the gentleman. Now if you'll sit down on the lounge like nice little boys and girls, and pretend I'm going to say something really worth hearing, I'll tell you all about it."

As a trio, they sat together. Sykes in the middle, the ladies making like bookends. All six eyes were upon me.

"Rodney Sykes' convenient headaches," I said, "enabled him to pop over from City Center during one of his lounge visits. It's barely ten minutes from here for a fast moving car or cab. He cracks the safe, takes the necklace, gives his haul to Carlotta who takes it to his home so it won't be hidden on these premises where it might be found. Ask *her* Donna. She and Rodney have been making love and crooked plans behind your back for months. She's too interested in him to be only a maid."

Sykes chuckled. "A story book plot. But I asked for proof. Where's the proof of all these things?" He started to get up angrily but I waved him back down.

"Sit down and behave yourself before I throw you down, and I'll tell you." There was a concerted gasp from the three of them. I had unholstered my .45 and was idly spinning it in the palm of my hand like it was a six shooter. I enjoyed the fact that Sykes' face lost a little color. Carlotta was stupified. Only Donna Fox was her own woman. The rich woman who could buy anything and make all bad things go away.

"You believe everything somebody tells you until the facts don't jibe. Then you begin to wonder what the lying is all

about. People only look guilty when the lies start popping up all over the place."

Donna Fox was impatient. "Really, is that gun necessary?"

"Real tough guy," Sykes said.

"About lies," I said. "Carlotta couldn't have gone to the library tonight."

Carlotta stirred angrily. "What do you mean I didn't go to the library? How dare you call me a liar!"

"Knock it off. It's Labor Day, remember? Libraries aren't open on legal holidays. At least, not where I come from."

"That's *right*!" Donna murmured. "*Carlotta!* You couldn't have brought that book back tonight. Why did you lie?"

Carlotta stared down at her hands, suddenly silent. I laughed and they all looked at me again.

"You could ask that question of Rodney, too, Miss Fox. You see that fluid from the furniture polish that was knocked over is on his suit. Go on, Miss Fox—smell his suit. Poor Mr. Sykes has such a bad cold he couldn't smell it on himself. That's why he fell down the stairs, too."

Sykes cleared his throat. "I beg your pardon?" It was pure bluff.

"You fell down those stairs a while ago, Rodney, because you stepped in the small puddle on

the floor by the piano and got some of the wax on your soles. You weren't trying to imitate Fred Astaire or anything like that."

Donna Fox's fiancé swallowed hastily as he looked at her.

"You don't really believe all this garbage, Donna? From him? A cheap detective out to make a fast dollar?"

Her beautiful face clouded over. "Rod, I don't know. Mr. Noon is a detective. A very highly regarded one at that. I hired him. He's doing precisely what I asked him to do."

"Bully for you, Miss Fox!" I said. "May I continue? Carlotta is the maid—it says here. A conscientious maid would have cleaned that mess on the piano, robbery or no robbery. Especially in a fancy layout like this. Which means only one thing to me. She's something else besides a maid. She had things on her mind—things like delivering the hot ice for Rodney to his place. She didn't have time to act like a maid at all."

Carlotta now bounced off the lounge, her eyes flashing, her round little bosom trying to climb out of the nice white uniform apron.

"I don't have to listen to myself being insulted like this. Don't talk to me, Mr. Noon. I don't want to hear it."



Rodney Sykes had risen, too. His thin frame, immaculate in tails, was somehow menacing despite his scarecrow physique. His watery blue eyes were beginning to have interesting lights in them.

"So you have everything figured out, eh? Carlotta and I have the necklace, you say? Know what I say? *Prove it.*"

"I don't have to prove anything, Sykes. You went to a lot of trouble for *nada*, as the Spanish say. Talking about *Something Of Value*, that necklace is nothing of value. It's a cheap imitation."

"Don't give me that," Sykes growled. "The Dakar is worth a quarter of a million dollars."

Donna Fox's voice carried wearily above our argument. She had been smart enough to pick up my bluff.

"No it isn't, Rod. Mr. Noon is telling the truth. He seems to

be the only one that is. I have the original Dakar in my vault at the bank. The one that is missing is a cheap imitation."

"What's that you say?" Stupidity churned for life on the Sykes face.

"That's right, Rodney," I said. "The Dakar you went to all the trouble of stealing is paste and paint. Let's walk over to your place, pick it up and have it appraised. What say? You really haven't committed too much of a felony. Turn it over and I'm sure Miss Fox will forget the whole thing for old time's sake."

"You're out of your mind," Rodney Sykes barked back at me.

I shrugged. "Am I? Okay. Let's do it by the numbers then. We all stay put. I'll phone Police Headquarters and ask for my good friend, Captain Monks. He'll run over to your pad and have a search warrant honored. If he finds it, look out. What's your story going to be then?"

He didn't have to answer me. He swallowed nervously and everyone in the room saw his face lose color. Donna Fox looked daggers at him. Carlotta studied a shiny watch on her wrist.

"Well, Rodney?" I asked.

"Donna," he began. "I'm sure you know how I love you."

She stared at him icily. "Is Mr. Noon guessing correctly, Rodney? That's all I want to know. Mr. Noon doesn't know that I am practically broke—bad investments."

While his tongue stalled on an answer, I walked slowly to the telephone by the lounge and swung the receiver easily to my shoulder. I began to dial, whistling softly to myself. Rodney Sykes whirled as the wheel clicked numbers away. His smile was sick yellow.

"All right, Noon. You win. But it's not entirely like you think. Donna is making a big mistake. Carlotta is the one who engineered all this and I've done my best to keep her from—"

Carlotta came alive again. "Big Brain! Wonderful big brain! You had it all figured out—a real cinch! And now all this planning and conniving for nothing!"

"Shut up, you fool!" Sykes growled. "Donna, don't listen to her. She's off her head. This Noon put her up to it. And she's always been jealous of my love for you."

Donna had turned her back on him. "I won't have you arrested, Rod. You can just leave, and send me back the necklace in the morning. I don't ever want to see you again."

"That's my department," I in-

interrupted. "I'll walk him home and pick it up for you. You give this bum time to think and he'll work up something cute like blackmail."

Sykes came at me, his scarecrow body twisting, his arms flailing his face livid with rage. Carlotta scooped up a vase and joined forces with him. Two amateurs out to square accounts like kids getting even.

I sidestepped Sykes and hit him, hard, once. He was too wide open to be a problem. His scarecrow body flew across the room and knocked some furniture over. Carlotta was about to make like Nolan Ryan when I poked the .45 right into her lovely face.

"Sit down before I give you a third eye—right between the two you've got now, baby."

"Get out, Carlotta," Donna Fox snapped. "Pack up and get out. After all I've done for you. You ungrateful little minx."

"Save the sermon, Miss Fox." Carlotta's eyes were still on fire. "I'm fed up with you, too, with your ever loving culture." She glared down at the recumbent figure of Rodney Sykes. "You can have the mastermind back, too! Aside from being a punk thief he's a lousy lover!"

With that, she flung herself from the room, sobbing in three quarter time. We could hear her pumps clacking across the

tiled foyer. The front door slammed like a 21-gun salute.

Donna Fox had suddenly broken down. She buried her face in her hands. Her fine back bobbed rhythmically. I holstered my gun and went over to the lounge and sat down. Rodney Sykes was groaning on the floor. The study was peaceful, otherwise.

"I believe—" Donna Fox sobbed softly through her slender fingers "—I owe you something like one thousand dollars."

"Something like that. Make the check out to cash. I'll bring you the necklace tomorrow morning. After I get it from Sykes and stop off at the bank. Okay?"

That made her stop crying. She almost smiled at me through her tears.

"Don't you trust me, Mr. Noon?"

I smiled back. "I do. I want an excuse to come back again. Do you mind?"

"No—but I don't understand."

"You need a guy to take you nightclubbing or to Central Park to see the squirrels, lady—not these guys who are interested in your checkbook. I look at you and I don't think of checkbooks."

Her beautiful face, red from crying, was puzzled.

She only began to understand when I took her in my arms.

Compliments Of Johnny Hawk



by EDWARD Y. BREESE

Someone is trying to set up Johnny into killing Phil Ritz and taking a fall for the job. But Johnny is smart enough to turn the whole deadly setup inside out and pick up all the marbles.

AT TEN-THIRTY on a Tuesday morning Jocko Hinds was washing his hands in the lobby rest room of the Empire Hotel on Miami Beach, Florida.

There were three other men in the washroom at the time. One was dropping a paper towel in the trash can. The second was combing his hair in front of the mirror not three feet to Jocko's left.

The third man stepped up behind Jocko and shoved a small, blue-steel automatic

against his back slightly above the belt line.

He said, "With the compliments of Johnny Hawk, Jocko." He said it loudly and distinctly so that everyone could hear.

Then he pulled the trigger.

The gun made a muffled sort of pop—not much louder than the sound in a teevy drama—and Jocko Hinds fell forward over the wash basin and then slid to the floor.

The man with the gun smiled at the two horrified spectators.



"Johnny Hawk says hello, Jocko," he said to the prostrate body. Then he put the gun back under his jacket and went out into the hotel lobby. Neither of the men who had witnessed the murder made any effort to stop him. They just stood there.

Jocko Hinds rolled over on the floor and sat up.

"A fine pair of punks you are!" he said to the two men. "Ain't you got no respect at all for law and order? One of you help me up, damn it!"

They both fumble-thumbed

around till they got him on his feet. There was water from the wash basin all over Jocko and some blood on the back of his jacket.

In his own way, Jocko was an admirer of mine. He wore his gun the same way I did—in a clip-on belt holster carried high in back over the right hip. The shot fired at him had ruined an otherwise perfectly good .380 Belgian automatic. A splinter or two had slashed the skin of Jocko's back—which accounted for the blood. There was also a

massive bruise where the gun had been. That was all the damage.

TWENTY MINUTES later Captain Bill Ryan of the Miami Homicide Squad and two of his boys walked into the Biscayne Boulevard restaurant where I was having a hearty breakfast.

"This is a bust, Johnny," Ryan told me. He said it in a nice loud tone of voice that got the attention of the waitress and the people in the two booths that flanked mine.

That was why I believed he meant it. Bill Ryan and I are old friends even though we aren't always on the same side when we meet. For some reason or other he wanted it known he was taking me in—and he'd brought the boys along to make sure I cooperated.

"Can I finish my breakfast, Cap?" I asked. "I've got a clean conscience."

"And I've got orders," he said. "If an invitation isn't enough, I can get a warrant charging conspiracy to Murder One."

"Who did I kill this time?" I asked. My conscience *was* clear. I hadn't even heard about the hit on Jocko Hinds as yet. For that matter, I hadn't thought of Jocko in months.

"We're wasting time," Ryan said. His tone read, *Hurry it up. We've played enough.*

I got in the car and went on over to Headquarters without any argument. Neither of us said anything more until we got to Ryan's private office. He left his boys outside in the squad room.

"Sorry about your breakfast, Johnny," he said then. He reached in the lower right hand drawer of his scarred up desk and got out a bottle of whiskey and a couple of tumblers. "Have some dessert on me."

"Never touch it when I'm working," I said. "Why don't you tell me what this is all about?"

He told me about Jocko Hinds. "The two witnesses were both positive it was your name the gunny used," he concluded.

"What does Jocko say about it?"

"Outside of 'I want to call my lawyer,' Jocko hasn't said one word. You know how it'll be, Johnny. He won't remember a thing. He didn't see anybody. He didn't hear anything but the shot—if he'll admit to that. All Jocko wants right now is to get under cover."

"That's par for the course in Jocko's league," I agreed. "So what do you think, Cap? Did I hire a goon to knock over a nothing from nowhere like Jocko Hinds?"

Ryan swallowed his drink, lit a long thin cigar and leaned

back in the aged swivel chair supplied for his use by the good citizenry of Miami. He gave me a level look.

"The whole thing stinks," he said. "You know it and I know it."

"Sure we do," I said. "But why don't you spell it out so I'll know what you know?"

"In the first place, Johnny, if you wanted Jocko Hinds dead, we'd have him on a slab in the icebox right now. You wouldn't have hired it done—not by some fumbling goon and not in a public washroom. Particularly, not with your name signed to the job.

"In the second place you wouldn't bother with a punk like Jocko. If he got in your way, you wouldn't kill him. Swat like a fly, yes—kill, no. You don't kill for money or for fun. You don't take candy from babies."

"You flatter me," I said, "but where does it leave us? We both know I didn't do it. All those kind words and forty cents buy me a bus ride—if you know what I mean."

"Sure," Ryan said, "Sure. We're nowhere. But I've got a funny mind like yours. I get ideas."

"Let me laugh, too, Cap."

"Somebody wants your name on our calendar pads," he said. "Jocko was an excuse—just

something to point us at you. Whoever it was has got to know we can't hold you long. You'll have an alibi or a lawyer to spring you. They don't even expect you held, but they do want you bothered and they want us to watch you."

"Why would anybody want that?" I asked as innocently as possible.

"That's what I was hoping you could tell me." Ryan took a long pull on his cigar. He sat there and waited. I looked innocent.

When he shifted in his chair I finally spoke up. "I've got a big public, Cap. Lots of them hate me. How do I know which one pulled this caper? I only heard about it now. Give me time to put a weasel in the brush pile and see what runs out. Then maybe I'll know what gives."

"That's what I thought you'd say," Ryan said. "It might even be the truth. I'm going to let you go."

"Alone?"

"Hell, no. I'll watch you as close as I can. Somebody's trying to confuse both of us, Hawk. I don't like it. I want to know who, most of all why."

"Sure," I said. "The old shell game. Now you see it, now you don't. I want to find out, too. I want to feel easy in washrooms. You leave me alone, though. I

can shake your tail and I will, Cap."

"You sure you don't want to tell me who it is?" Ryan said. "Save us both a lot of trouble, Johnny."

"I don't know, Captain," I said. "That's the living truth—I don't know."

"And if you did you wouldn't say," he told me. "Someday one of your many admirers will use that independence to get you, Johnny. The morgue will have you with a hole in your head. I'll be sorry to see it. Now get out of here."

I got.

I went back to my apartment looking out over Biscayne Bay on the northeast side of town. I went in the front way. If somebody was watching to see if Ryan had let me go, I wanted him to know.

Inside, I got a gun and two fingers of good French brandy—in that order. I put the gun in a clip holster back of my right hip and then I put the brandy about two inches straight in front of the gun. Then I felt better.

In spite of the fact I'd denied it to Ryan, I had a notion who might be after my scalp right at this point. He was just the sort to think the Jocko Hinds caper was funny. If the gunny hadn't fumbled, and Jocko had lead poisoning of the kidneys,

it would have had him laughing for weeks. As far as I knew he had nothing against Jocko either.

His name was Phil Ritz.

He was Carole Rizzo's husband.

For the past six months, I'd been seeing a lot of Carole Rizzo. She said she was in love with me. I knew I wasn't in love with her in spite of the fact Carole was the sort of chick that puts the upper-case S, E and X in SEX. That was part of it, of course, but there were other parts I hadn't told Carole about yet.

Phil Ritz wouldn't know that though.

Two weeks back I'd had a letter. It came in a plain white envelope with an Atlanta postmark and no return address. It wasn't signed—and my address and the one-sentence message were block printed in a hand I didn't recognize. It was short and to the point.

P.R. checked out a week ago. That was all.

I burned it. It could have meant nothing at all. On the other hand, P.R. could be Phil Ritz. He had been doing time in the Federal Storage Vault at Atlanta.

It gave me something to think about, and I sat there and watched the yachts and tugs and garbage scows on Bis-

cayne Bay and thought about it. If Phil Ritz was loose and if he knew about Carole and me and if he was the one back of the Jocko Hinds business—then I was as near dead as I ever want to be.

Then I was standing right in front of the pock-marked wall, smoking a last cigarette while the firing squad scuffed their feet in the sand and wondered what was for breakfast back in the barracks. Anyway, that's how I felt.

When the phone rang I wondered whether to pick it up or let it ring. For a minute it was a tossup. Then I took it off the cradle and said, "Room service."

Carole's voice said, "Johnny. Oh, Johnny, I'm scared. I'm so scared!" She sounded like she meant it.

I said, "Hold it, honey. It's only three in the afternoon, and the bogies don't bump till night."

"I'm scared, Johnny. I'm scared! You've got to come over here right away. Please, please, please, Johnny! I'm so scared."

"What's the matter?"

"I think this phone is bugged, Johnny. You have to come over right now. I love you, Johnny, and I'm scared." Then I heard the receiver click down and the line went dead.

I sat there and thought about it for a minute, and then I got



up and put a spare clip of forty-fives in my jacket pocket and went out to my car. I was going over to Carole's pad on the Beach.

Of course, if her phone *was* bugged, whoever had that done would know I was coming. I didn't much care. I don't like being stalked like a prize elk by a hunter under cover. The more I exposed myself, the better chance there was he'd come out where I could see *him*.

WHEN I WALKED out the front door of my apartment building somebody took a shot at me from the ground-floor parking area of the new high-rise across the street. I didn't see him and with all the traffic noise and whatnot I didn't hear the shot. The bullet went so close to my face I heard it buzz and almost felt the wind, and it knocked a chip out of the old coral rock framing the doorway. That and the lead smear on the stone was how I knew I'd been shot at. It was small calibre—probably only a high velocity twenty-two.

Hit in the head, I'd have been dead for sure. Either he was a damned poor shot or he only wanted to warn me. I figured probably it was the latter.

I resisted the urge to go after him. I couldn't have found him anyway, so I tried to look as if I hadn't noticed anything and went on and got into my own car.

"I'm supposed to be scared," I told the silver St. Christopher medal spiked to the dashboard. "He doesn't want me dead yet, but he wants me spooked before I see Carole."

The good saint went right on wading through the water like he hadn't heard me at all.

"First Jocko and then Carole and now this," I said out loud. "If I scare, I'll do something he

wants me to do and that could be fatal. Only *what* does he want me to do?"

Carole's place was in one of those flashy apartment buildings on the Beach side of the 79th St. Causeway. It had white wall-to-wall carpeting that had been cleaned enough times so the pile was thin and red drapes and neon naugahyde furniture. It had a king-sized bed with a new mattress and a three-burner stove with only two burners working.

All of Carole Rizzo's burners worked all the time though. She was a redhead with pale blonde roots and curves to make Harun al Rashid scrap the whole rest of the hareem. Her voice was low and throaty and her hands and lips were always hot. Twenty-four hours a day they were hot.

She must have been watching out the window, because she got the door open before I even touched the bell. When I shut it behind me, she was all over me like steam in a sauna bath.

When I finally got my lips a couple of inches away from hers, she said, "Johnny, Oh, Johnny—thank God you came!"

"I'm here," I said and got away from her like peeling an octopus. "Stay far enough away so I can think and tell me what all this is about."

"I have to stay close and talk

in your ear, lover," she said. "I think this pad is bugged. Besides, don't you like it?"

"I like it too much," I said. "I can't think. Turn the teevee on loud if you think this joint's bugged."

"It blew a tube last night," she said right against my ear. "The idiot box, I mean. Oh—lover!"

I managed to get away from her finally. "I don't care if the place is tapped," I said. "Stay away from me. Come out on the balcony. In the open, the street noise will cover us if we talk low."

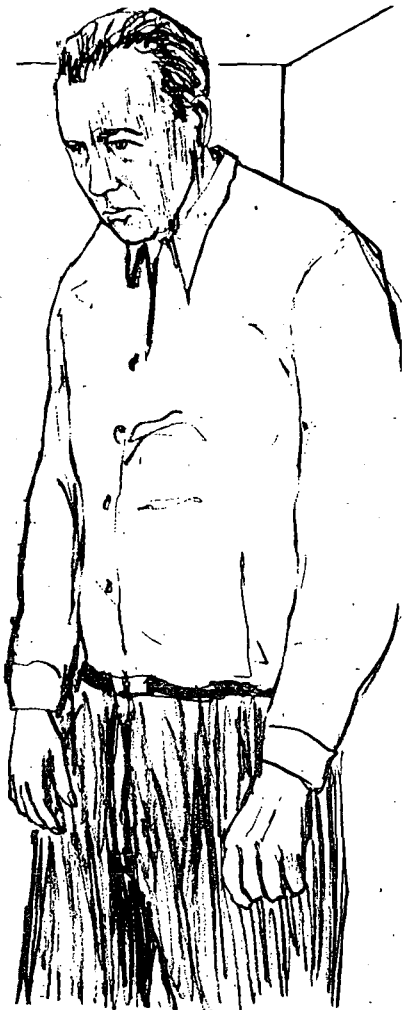
There was a postage-stamp balcony outside the living room. We sat on the mat she kept there for sun-bathing.

"Look at this," she said and handed me something wrapped in a towel. "Then you'll know why I'm scared."

When I unwrapped the towel, "this" turned out to be a dead alley cat. Somebody had cut its throat and dressed it in a doll's red dress after it was dead. Carole Rizzo liked red dresses. I wrapped the thing up again.

All my life, I've been fond of stray cats.

"It was hanging on my doorknob when I started to go out this morning," she said. "When I unwrapped it, I almost fainted. Oh, Johnny lover—I'm scared."



"Who put it there?" I asked her.

"How should I know? Somebody who hates me."

"Stop it," I said. "You level

with me, lovely, or I get up and get out of here right now. I think you know damned well who hung that thing on you. If I'm going to help, I've got to know, too."

She looked hurt. I started to get up off the mat.

"Okay," she said. "Okay, lover. I didn't want to say because I don't really *know* for sure. But if you're going to act that way. . ." She was making a big production out of it—looking up at me from under fluttering lashes. "Lover—they've let Phil out of the Atlanta pen."

"I said, 'I know that.'"

It spoiled her big moment some, but she recovered fast. "Well, don't you see? Who else could it be but Phil. He must know about us."

"If he does, why didn't he come on in and cut your throat instead of a cat's?" I said. "Believe me, sweetness—if you were two-timing *me*, that's what I'd do."

She flinched exactly the way I'd known she would. She couldn't be sure I knew about Big Ricardo—and then again, she couldn't be sure I didn't. I hadn't brought the subject up. She heaved her bosom at me and let her eyes get all wet and hot. Believe me the sphinx would have yelled like a tomcat under a look like that.

I leaned over and kissed her and then pulled back fast. "Go on—tell me," I said.

"It just has to be Phil, lover. That's the sort he is—mean and vicious and cruel. It would take a mean man to kill a cat like that—a real mean man. Besides, who hates us both like Phil? Who's as cruel as him?"

As far as I was concerned, this town was full of cruel men—most of them good runners-up for the title of the world's meanest.

For that matter, Big Ricardo Milan was no lame duck in the mean-man sweepstakes himself. He was a gun runner and smuggler and owned a stable of call girls and a couple of chains of loanshark offices. I doubt if Big Ricky ever touched a clean dollar or did a decent thing in his life. If ever I saw a good candidate for cat-killer, he was it.

The thing that made me hesitate was the fact I knew Big Ricky for a dedicated coward. He hired all his killings done, and even then he was shaking in his boots.

For one thing, he'd wanted Carole Rizzo for at least five years. He didn't dare take her while Phil Ritz was loose, because he was afraid of Phil. By the same token, he wouldn't take her or make a pass at her out in the open while I went

with her. He was afraid of Johnny Hawk.

He was right there. I had other reasons besides Carole Rizzo for wanting Big Ricky dead and scalped. That was one of the reasons I played around with Carole at all—the fact I knew he wanted her. She wanted him, too—or at least all that greasy money he had—but Carole was a coward, too. Not quite as big a coward as Big Ricky, but a coward all the same.

I kept all this to myself.

"Suppose it is Phil," I said to Carole, "and he really is out and running? What then?"

"Oh, lover," she said, "You know what then. He's out on a bought parole. He's come after us. You've got to get him first, Johnny."

It amused me she didn't say, "We've got to get him." Any dirty work was a monopoly for good old Johnny-lover-boy.

"That's a sweet thought, baby," I said. "Only one thing—this is a big town. There's a million and a quarter citizens in Dade County, and how do I find Phil Ritz in all that crowd. You and I are in the phone book, sweets—but where do I look for good old Phil."

She told me where right off—and that fact told me something else I wanted to know. "He's got a sister, lover,"

she said. "He has to see her for a stake. You can find her and she'll know where Phil is. If he's not with her, you can make her tell."

"Suppose he's smart enough to stay away from his sister?" I asked. "It won't take a genius to figure that's where we'd look first."

"He *has* to see her, Johnny. Phil has a hundred thousand dollars in a bank box here, and she's been holding the key to that box. When you take him, Johnny, he'll have the money or the key on him. Think what we can do with a hundred grand, lover. Think about *that*!"

I thought about it.

"You better get started," she said. "I'll give you the sister's address. You can go out the back way. We're being watched."

"I know we are," I said. I'd already spotted the quiet character on the bus bench across the way. He'd let two buses go by. "Who is he? Some pal of Phil's?"

"I think so," she said. "I've seen him someplace before."

She was right about that last part. He was Pat Meers and he was a detective. Two years back he'd helped bust a combined bookie joint and cocktail bar Carole was fronting for. She had reason to remember him. He'd since been transferred to Homicide; so I knew Bill Ryan

had sent him after me. I didn't mention it to lover-girl.

Instead, I memorized the address she gave me and went on out the back way like she'd said. Carole Rizzo wanted me to find her husband and kill him for her. Then there'd be that juicy big hundred G's to split. First though, like the recipe says, you got to catch your rabbit.

After that, you can start the stew.

I made a big deal out of getting out of the area without being seen by Meers. I wanted him hanging around where Carole could see him once in a while, and I didn't much care whether the sight scared her or made her feel better.

The address she'd given me for Phil Ritz' sister was in a rough section of the North West side of town. That gave me a life. Here she was, sitting on a hundred grand one way or another, and shacked up in a dump I wouldn't wish on anybody. It usually works out that way.

I went to a bar I knew where I could be an invisible man for a while and called Captain Ryan at Headquarters. "I said not to have me tailed," I told him.

That only got a laugh. "Nobody tailed you, Johnny. I just sent Pat on up to wait till you

showed up. I suppose you slipped him."

"If he waits long enough, I'll be back there," I said. "He can pick me up then. That's not what I really called about, though."

"I know," Ryan said. "You want to know how come Phil Ritz got out of Atlanta after only two years of a five-to-twenty stretch."

"You're psychic," I said.

"The truth is, Johnny, I'd like to know that myself. Somebody used a lot of clout to get him a parole. That sort of clout is expensive. It was all done by lawyers. I'm trying to find out whose money they used."

"It wasn't Phil's money?"

"Don't kid me, Johnny. Phil Ritz never had that sort of money and never will. Where are you, Johnny, and what are you up to?"

"I don't rightly know," I told him. "That's the truth."

"Now look, Johnny, I'm not kidding around. Come on in before you get into trouble you can't wiggle out of. If you kill Ritz, I'm going to have to bust you. We want him, too, right now. Get out and let us take him off your back."

"He's not on my back. You are. Get off."

"I'm putting out an A.P.B. on you, Johnny."

"Don't do that, Cap. I might

be working for you this time."

"Now look here, Hawk," he said. "You know I can record calls coming in on this phone."

I knew that. He had a machine right on his desk for the purpose. It could pick up not only the speaker but most of the background noise in a room as well.

"I'm recording this call," Ryan said. "I want it on record. You come in here for questioning. Get your nose out of police business and leave it to the pros. We can handle Phil Ritz. And in case you still think you're ahead of us, we can take care of Ricardo Milan too."

I hung up fast. That last remark jolted me for fair. How much did Ryan know or guess anyway?

It was too late to back up now, though—even if Ryan was doing more than mere guessing. I had to handle it my way. I got out of the bar in case Ryan had had time to trace the call. I didn't spot anyone watching my car.

I drove a few blocks further to be on the safe side, then stopped and unlocked the trunk. There was a device in there that looked like a pocket transistor radio in a plastic case. Only it wasn't. It was an even thousand dollars worth of highly sophisticated mini-recorder that went to work



when a button was pushed. I figured the cops didn't have to be the only ones who could tape a conversation.

I put the thing in my pocket, checked my gun one last time for luck and went after Phil Ritz.

The way to handle a Gordian knot is—cut it.

Of course I didn't bother with the address Carole had given me. The street around that dump would be full of characters waiting to tail me when I left.

Besides, I'd studied Phil Ritz till I knew his habits as well as he did himself. Phil was too smart to go near his sister—let alone shack up in her place. If he contacted her at all, it would be by calling from a pay phone a long way off. I knew where

he'd hide out, because it was a place he'd used before when the heat was on. He'd feel safe to use it again.

The joint was an old tumbledown boomtime motel north of Seventy-ninth Street and west of Seventh Avenue. There was a bar in front and a double row of ancient frame-stucco cabins running back the whole depth of the lot. It was late in a winter afternoon and getting dark by the time I got there. I parked in the street behind and cut through an alley to the back of the motel lot.

Phil's lucky number was seven, so I tried that cabin first. A couple of noisy drunks were making "love" inside, so that wasn't the one.

Number Seventeen was dark and quiet. The vacancy sign was down off the door.

The front doors of the cabins had nice new locks and a glass pane (frosted), through which the occupant could spot the shadow of anybody standing there. The rear doors were paint-peeling wood and locked with an iron skeleton key.

I WAS INSIDE Number Seventeen before the man on the bed knew I was trying. He heard me close the door and sat up. Even after two years and with a new "hippie" beard on his face I knew it was Phil. He had

his shoes and jacket off, but was fully dressed otherwise. He put his sock feet on the floor when he sat up.

"It's Johnny Hawk, Phil," I said. "I thought I'd welcome you back."

He was twice as fast as I'd thought possible. He was off the bed and on his feet over to my right. The switchblade Italian stiletto grew in his hand. I swear I never saw him pull it. It was there—like pointing a finger.

Phil didn't spread his arms and hop around like a gamecock the way the punk kids do with a knife. He was a pro and he came right at me, pushing the knife, with his thumb, the blade making one straight line.

I swung a punch which he blocked with his left arm and drove that blade through right where my gut had been a microsecond before.

I'm fast, too. I went sideways, pivoting on heel and toe. At that, he'd still have had me if I hadn't sucked my gut in. When he went past, I caught his knife-wrist with my left hand and slapped a rabbit punch to the back of his neck with my right.

Phil Ritz had a neck like a bull, and he was moving away from the punch. He stayed on his feet. I came round behind

him and swung a roundhouse right to the back of his head. He just about rammed his head through the cabin wall. That settled that.

When Phil came to he was back on the bed, only this time I had him professionally trussed up like a Christmas package. He tried to spit at me, but it wasn't much of a try.

"Get off my back, Hawk," he said then. "I ain't after you. You're a patsy like the rest of them she gets her hooks into. It's that no-good broad I came for."

"I know that, Phil," I said. "She doublecrossed me like she did you."

"Then what're you here for? Let me go and I'll settle her bash for the both of us. Why should you and me fight over a broad like her?"

"We shouldn't," I said. "That's not what I'm here for, old buddy."

He thought about that. Then his face went pale and he started to fight his bonds. I let him try it and get nowhere.

"I should of known," he said then. "Of course she wants me dead."

"That's right, Phil," I said. "Killing you is her idea. That's what she sent me to do. Of course the build-up was a bit fancier than that—but killing you is what it boils down to.

I've got to admit that's about it."

It took him a minute before he could say anything more. He had to lick dry lips. "You going to do it, Hawk?"

I let him suffer a while. "I haven't decided yet, Phil," I said. "Maybe—maybe not. It depends on a lot of things."

"I've got money," he said. "Take it and let me go."

"That's right," I said. "Carole told me you had a hundred grand."

"She lied." He looked desperate. "Twenty grand—that's all. I swear it. Cut me loose and I'll tell you where it's hid."

"I believe she lied," I said. "Carole never expected me to have any of the money anyway—so why not lie about the size of the pot?"

"Let me go and it's yours," he said.

"Where is it?"

"Cut me loose first."

"No. You tell me first, Phil. It has to be someplace in this shack. I can kill you and find it. You tell me. You got nothing to lose."

"It's in the coffee can under the kitchenette sink," he said finally. It hurt him to say it—but I guess he knew he really *hadn't* a thing to lose.

The money was there all-right, in two big rolls of hundreds fastened with rubber

bands. I put it in my jacket pockets.

"Cut me loose now."

"Not right now, Phil," I said.

"This isn't over yet."

He tried to spit at me again, but this time I gagged him. He could still breathe but he couldn't make a sound.

The cabin was pretty ratty but at least the owners had installed a phone for the use of the paying guests. I called a number on the Beach and gave my name. After stalling around for a couple of minutes, they put the man I wanted on the line.

"All right, Ricardo," I said, "this is Johnny Hawk. I've got Phil Ritz with me all tied up and ready to deliver."

"I don't know nothing about no Phil Ritz," the voice said.

"I haven't time to play games," I said. "If you want him dead, you're going to have to come over here."

Phil's eyes, over the gag, were pure distilled essence of hate.

"I told you I don't know nothing..." the voice on the wire started again.

I said, "Shut up. Your baby doll slipped, Ricardo. She let me know she knew about Jocko Hinds. She hadn't been out all day and her teevee was busted—so she had to have been in on planning that or had

a phone call—one. I suppose it was one of your lads that shot Jocko and took a shot at me."

"You're crazy!"

"No," I said. "I'm not crazy. You and Carole want Phil dead. You sprung him out of Atlanta. Then you made me think he was gunning for me, so I'd kill him. Okay, so maybe I will—but not for nothing. Not for just the fun of thinking about you with Carole. If you really want Phil dead, it'll cost you, Mr. Milan."

Even over the phone I could almost hear the wheels turn as his filthy little mind took hold of that thought. After a while he said, "How much?"

"Carole mentioned fifty grand," I said. "I was to get it from Phil Ritz—only he hasn't got that kind of dough. You and Carole come over here, Mr. Milan. By yourselves. No gunnies. Bring fifty grand in small bills. Get it from one of your gambling banks."

"I don't know..."

"Then make up your mind. You've got one hour. You and sweetie-pie show up here with fifty thousand dollars, cash. If you aren't here in exactly sixty minutes, I use this phone to call Captain Bill Ryan. He'd like to see Phil Ritz, too. Phil can hear what I'm saying, Ricardo. If I give him to Ryan, he'll sing like a mocking bird."

I hung up, after telling him the address.

Big Ricky got the message all right. It only took him 42 minutes to pick up Carole and the money and come over the causeway.

I sat there in the only easy chair in the cabin in the dark and smelled the fear sweat out of Phil Ritz on the bed. Phil was working through those thousand deaths every coward is supposed to die. I was careful not to interrupt his train of thought.

When I heard Big Ricky on the walk outside Cabin Seventeen, I turned on one of the low-watt light bulbs supplied by a parsimonious management and let him in. I also punched the button on the recorder in my pocket.

Ricardo had a nice shiny executive-type attaché case. He didn't open it till he and Carole looked over the merchandise on the bed. I swear it was as impersonal as inspecting a plucked chicken on the meat market counter. They wanted to be sure it was Phil and not a ringer.

"Hello Carole, lover," I said then.

She didn't even flinch. "He made me do it, Johnny," she said. "I swear I love you, but he made me."

"I know," I said. "All that

lovely money of his made you. You don't fool me a bit, lover girl. Count the money out on the table new lover boy."

"You sure we got this straight?" he said to me. "You try to cross me, Hawk, and you won't like what happens."

"I know," I said, "but I'll say it again for the record. You're paying me fifty thousand dollars in cash. For that money, as soon as you leave here, I kill Phil Ritz and take his body out and dump it in the 'Glades. That right?"

"That's it exactly," he said for my benefit and the little tape-recorder's. "Now I'll count the money where you can watch."

"You don't have to bother," I said.

That shook him. "Okay. You can trust me."

"No," I said. "Not exactly. Nobody can trust anybody in this place right now. You've got gunnies around this place, waiting to make sure I kill Phil Ritz. As soon as they're sure I do that, they call the cops and finger me."

"You're crazy," he said.

"No, Ricky," I said. "You're the one who's crazy. Crazy for Carole—crazy to believe her. She thought this up for you. Phil and I were both in your way and hers. So she told you what to do. Spring Phil and make it look like he's after me.

That Jocko business for instance. I fall for it and kill Phil—which is what the cops are looking for me to do. You turn me in to fry. Then you and Carole are home free—till she wants to get rid of you too.”

Carole caught on first. She said, “*Kill him, Ricky!*” and opened her mouth to scream for his gunnies in the street.

I didn’t give her time. I belted her a backhand clip that tumbled her in the corner.

Big Ricky went for the gun under his armpit.

I brought a punch up from the floor that broke his jaw and almost tore his head off. He fell across Carole’s legs. When she tried to get up, I hit her again—hard enough to put her out for the count. Either that or kill her—and I don’t kill women who’ve ever called me lover.

Then I picked up the phone and called Bill Ryan. The first squad cars were there in min-

utes. They collected Ricky’s boys in the street on their way in.

I gave them the three in the cabin and the attaché case full of money *and* my little recorder full of evidence.

Carole said, “Why, lover? *Why!*”

I jerked a thumb at Big Ricky. “Why not? I said. “It’s gotten so a good citizen like me can’t feel safe in anybody’s bed with the likes of you punks around. Besides, it’s my civic duty.”

I told the cops, when they stopped laughing, I’d drive my own car down to Headquarters and Bill Ryan’s office for the post mortem. On the way, I stopped off long enough to bank Phil Ritz’s twenty thousand with a friend I could trust. Nobody had mentioned it in the cabin and, after all, he’d paid it to me not to kill him. I hadn’t killed him. Any way you look at it, I’d saved his life.

NEXT MONTH:

SHAKESPEARE’S LEFT EAR

by LARENCE TREAT

The ear missing from the library bust appeared to be a very petty crime—but brilliant detective work revealed it to be part of a subtle cover-up for murder.

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MURDER STALKS A GHOST TOWN

With wham! Bang! Shoot 'em up! twice a day week days and three times Sunday, tourists came in droves. The cast remained the same; but somebody changed the props!



by

**MERLE
AHERN**

CHARITY, Arizona—pop. 364 as they say in the guide books—was fast becoming a ghost town until Jerry Frank arrived. Frank put our town on the map with a bang, and I mean that for real—a pistol bang. Why, we made all the newspapers in Arizona and were on TV all across the country.

Charles Keralt arrived with a couple of cameramen and a truckload of equipment and shot a whole program of "On the Road." Mr. Keralt sat right there in that stool. It was the same stool that Frank sat on when he first came into Dad's cafe, but that's not much of a coincidence because we only got six stools.

I was behind the counter the

day Jerry Frank arrived in town. The screen door flung open, and here was this scrawny, little guy, fortyish, with a tanned and wrinkled face and scanty, red fuzz all over the top of his head.

"Hi," the stranger said. "Coffee, please, and a piece of that apple pie."

I took the plastic cover off the pie Dad had baked that morning and cut off a hunk while I sized up the little man. I could see Dad, in our back booth, was giving him the once over, too. We don't get many strangers in Charity.

The man pulled the pie over in front of him. His hands were freckled and rough and full of calluses. He saw me looking at them and laughed.

"I'm a carpenter . . . retired. Going to build me an old Western town."

Some kind of nut, I thought. I didn't have any other customers, as usual, so I pulled up my stool and leaned my elbows on the counter.

"What's your name, son?" the man asked.

"Dan. Dan Conley."

"You're a big one, aren't you? Two hundred and a quarter? Six foot three?"

I nodded. "Close."

"I'm Jerry Frank from Pennsylvania. You live here in Charity, Dan?"

"Uh huh. All my life," I said.

"Any property for sale around here?"

"All of it." I grinned, looking over to where Dad sat, hiding behind the Desert Sun. "Want to buy a cafe?"

"Nope. I want acreage. Been looking at land down Tombstone way, but it's too expensive. I want a big enough spread to build a whole Western town like it was a hundred years ago."

"You want to build a whole town just for yourself?"

"Yup. Been reading Western stories and watching Westerns on TV and the movies all my life. Now I got me some money, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life building a saloon, a general store, blacksmith shop, you name it."

Frank waved his fork around, scattering pie crust on my clean, red linoleum countertop. The screen door banged, and I got up in relief. The guy needs a shrink, I thought. What a bunch of bull.

It wasn't nobody but Charity Manning. She came in and sat down on the stool next to the little man. There wasn't nothing to do but introduce them. The man had turned and was smiling at her just as if she was a pretty girl.

"Mr. Frank, Charity. Uh, this is Charity Manning."

"Charity? Is the town named for you, Miss?"

Charity laughed, showing her large, horsy teeth. She does have a beautiful body, but her face is sure nothing special. She is sort of dumb, which makes two reasons she is still unmarried at thirty.

"Oh, no. It was named for my great-grandmother, the first Charity Manning."

"She must have been as lovely as her namesake."

"Wow!" I said, and they both glared at me.

"Oh, I'm not beautiful, but she was. Why two men fought a duel over her, right out in that street there."

The little man was quivering with excitement.

Well, I thought, there's your old West, man. Bet Charity doesn't tell you her beautiful ancestor was a prostitute.

"My great-grandmother was an entertainer, Mr. Frank. When she arrived here sometime in the early eighteen eighties, the town was booming and was called Mine City."

"She was very entertaining." I said.

"All the men were in love with her," Charity said, frowning at me. "Two of the miners shot and killed each other . . . right out in front of that gas station. The Arizona Saloon used to be on that corner."

"Was she heartbroken, Miss Manning?"

"Sure she was," I said. "She lost a couple of customers. She owned part of the saloon."

"Please, Dan," Charity said.

Briefly the man looked my way. He had funny eyes, little ones, deep set in a frame of wrinkles and so washed out they didn't even seem to focus on you. I figured I'd gone too far. Mr. Frank was no dope.

I felt like a heel. After all, Charity and I grew up together and she was almost like an older sister. If she wanted to get romantic over her grasping old ancestor, why not? Mr. Frank was eating up the story and Charity, too. The poor kid hadn't had this much attention since the time a year or so ago when Bill Maharg threw some passes in her direction. Of course, she knew Maharg didn't mean nothing by it. He likes more of a challenge. Married women are what attracts him. Still, it must of been fun for Charity.

"And it was my great-grandmother married the owner of the Arizona Saloon. When the miners started to leave, they bought up most of the town and changed the name from Mine City to Charity. You see, water rose in the mines, and there were fires, too."

"What a story!" Mr Frank beamed at Charity.

"That isn't all the story," I said. "Then that other Charity's husband died in a mysterious fire. Somebody set fire to the barn that was down the street ... where that grocery store is ... and his body was found in the ashes."

I watched Charity relax her shoulders. She'd been afraid I was going to tell Mr. Frank that people around here still wondered if that first Charity hadn't set fire to that barn herself. There has been talk in every generation about the Mannings. I guess every town has a family that supplies gossip for the rest of its inhabitants. The Mannings always were a little different from the rest of us.

"Wow!" Mr. Frank said. "Miss Charity, do you have any pictures or photographs of the town as it used to be then? I'm going to retire in Arizona someplace and build me a Western town just like it was in those old days."

Well, that was the start of the trouble. Jerry Frank bought some acreage right out of town, near the freeway. He hired Bill Maharg and me and some of the other young men to help build his town, but he did most of the work himself. We hauled old boards from the fall-

en down mine shacks back in the hills, and his town looked like it had been there forever. At first, it was just a collection of fake, wooden fronts. "Old Charity Town" he called it and modeled it on pictures Charity gave him of our town in the 1880's.

I liked to tease Charity that Jerry Frank finally got around to marrying her to get those old pictures so he could model his town on the old Mine City. It never bothered her none—Charity knew Frank loved her.

You would of thought she was a real beauty instead of a sort of horse-faced girl with stringy, brown hair. Why, Frank was even jealous of us younger men, but he didn't need be.

Charity was a good wife to him, working right along with Frank to build his town, and never grumbling about having to live in the shed-like rooms tacked onto the back of the Old West Print Shop. It was Charity, too, that got the idea of luring tourists off the freeway to have coffee and pie in the Arizona Saloon when they got it finished.

Frank went farther. He borrowed some money from a Phoenix bank, built backs on the false fronts for shops and snack bars, and printed up

brochures telling about the old duel over the first Charity. He put a fake adobe wall all around the place and charged the tourists three bucks a head to wander around Old Charity Town. Then he thought up what was to be the main tourist attraction, the staged shoot-out on Old Main Street that Bill Maharg and I put on twice a day—three times on Sunday.

It went like this: Frank and his helpers would herd the tourists onto the raised, wooden sidewalks on each side of the dirt street. Then Maharg and me would go into our act.

Maharg would come out of one end of the street, and I came out of the other, from the old barn. Big Dan—me—and Killer Maharg—Bill—would highnoon it toward each other down the length of the dusty street. We'd take it slow, arms tensed at our sides, hands over the butts of our six-shooters. We were dressed like the cowboys on TV with boots, chaps, leather vests—the works.

THIS DAY was a hot, Saturday afternoon, and I was watching a little boy in a red striped shirt. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the damn kid keep getting away from his mother and running out into the street.

"I told you to stay away from my girl, Killer." Loudspeakers hidden along the street blared out the words while I mouthed them. We taped all this stuff months before.

"She's not your girl, Big Dan. Charity is everybody's girl."

"You take that back, you yellow-bellied snake." Old Town is a family attraction. *Good, clean entertainment for young and old* was what Jerry Frank said in the advertising.

Now a girl appeared on the second story balcony along the front of the Arizona Saloon, right over the heads of the tourists. Her highly amplified screams echoed along the false fronts of the souvenir and gift shops.

The girl, of course, was Charity Manning Frank. She was dressed in a short, dance hall costume, just like the one her great-grandmother wore in the early days. The men would all gawk up at her in those black tights.

Charity then threw her arms out in a practiced gesture. "Come on, boys. Don't be foolish. Come on in the bar. Drinks are on the house."

Killer and I ignored the woman on the balcony above as usual. We continued our stalking.

This day I am thinking, boy, Bill looks bad. Bet he hasn't

been to bed—at home, that is. I wondered, briefly, what husband was after him this time.

Under his dirty, old Stetson, Maharg set his tired face in a sneer. I thrust my jaw out like the proud hero. All the kids were screaming. Cameras clicked on either side.

Our guns blazed out at the same time. Maharg faltered, spun around, and fell to the ground. The babies in their strollers started to cry at the sound of our shots.

“Is he dead, Mama?” a little girl asked.

“No, honey, it’s just make-believe. He’s not really dead.”

I turned my back and started to walk to the barn. Behind me, according to the act, Maharg was supposed to raise himself up on one elbow and point his gun at my back. I waited for the sound of his shot. This bit was always good for hisses from the crowd. Some kid always hollered, “The bad guy shot the good cowboy in the back!”

Damn it, I thought, Bill shoot me!

Maharg’s timing was way off. It was funny that none of the kids were yelling, “Look out, Big Dan,” like they usually did.

I slowed my steps. The barn was getting close. I needed room for my staggering exit through the corral. Of course, then I would come right out

again to sign autographs and pose for pictures with the tourists while over my head, the recorded voice of Frank would boom from the loudspeakers:

“Hope you enjoyed our show, folks. Let me remind you that we are now serving our Buffalo Burgers at the snack bar located in the Old Jail. . . .”

Frank would be starting his spiel before I could exit if Maharg didn’t hurry. The crowd was unusually silent, so I heard the child’s words clearly. “Mom, is that real blood coming out of the man’s head?”

“No, honey, it’s just ketchup or something.”

I heard the words, but they didn’t sink in for a minute. Blood? That wasn’t in the act. In good, wholesome family entertainment, death is neat and clean. I heard Charity begin to scream—thin, real sounding. I threw a glance over my shoulder.

Maharg was still lying in the street. Blood was pumping out of the mess that used to be his forehead. The dust under his head was damp and dark.

While I stared, a man broke out of the crowd and knelt beside Maharg. My God, I thought, I really shot him! But how could I? The bullets were only blanks. I ran toward

Maharg, pushing people back. The man at his side looked up at me.

"I'm a doctor," he said. "Call an ambulance."

I ran to Frank's office behind the Old Print Shop. Charity followed me into the room. Frank was already there.

"I've called Doc," Frank said. His eyes were dull-looking, blank, without pupils, and his little body was shaking all over.

"Call an ambulance. We got a doctor."

"You know we don't have an ambulance," Charity said. "Call Sheriff Painter." She was much calmer than Frank or me, but her eyes were shiny and sort of popped out of her head.

Frank sank down into the swivel chair in front of the roll-top desk. "Poor Bill. I just can't believe it. The shoot-out was real!"

Well, I still couldn't believe it was for real even as I sat waiting for Sheriff Painter to take me to jail in Phoenix. I was feeling real bad about killing Maharg. We never had been close. We didn't like the same things, but we had grown up together.

It was such a horrible way to die, lying in the dust of a phony street, shot by someone you trusted, in a play-act. Who could have hated him so much



they wanted him to die surrounded by gaping strangers, I wondered. Then I forgot about Bill Maharg and worried all the way into Phoenix about what they would do with me.

"You might be able to get him out on bail," Sheriff Painter said to my dad who was riding with us in the Sheriff's car.

"Bail? For murder?" Dad said. Then: "Do you think Bill himself might have changed the bullets in Dan's gun?"

"Suicide? No, don't think so. Bill wouldn't have done that to Dan."

Me, I wasn't so sure, but I didn't say so. Bill Maharg loved practical jokes, played some real mean ones on people. It wouldn't have bothered him none to hurt someone else, but he loved his handsome self too much to do a thing like that. It was just too crazy.

That was the last thing Dad said to me when they left me at the jail. "It's crazy, Dan, just crazy."

Dad was right about it being crazy. But he was wrong about the bail. I was out in twenty-four hours. Less.

I almost wished they hadn't allowed bail. The next couple of weeks were pure hell. There was Maharg's funeral, and the funny way everybody at home looked at me, and the endless sessions with the homicide men from Phoenix.

This latest session with the cops we were all together in Frank's office behind the Old Print Shop.

"Okay," the lieutenant said. "The only prints on the gun were Conley's and yours, Mr. Frank."

Jerry Frank squirmed in his seat. "I was careless, Lieutenant. I've said so, time and time again. Believe me, I haven't slept since that day, feeling it

was all my fault that someone got a chance to exchange those blanks."

The room was silent.

I believed him. Frank looked bad, every wrinkle in the dried-up, old face was as deep as a desert gully.

"Look, Lieutenant, I told you how it was," I said, weary of the whole damn thing. "Bill and me would come to the office here after the shoot-out, take off the belts, and load the blanks for the next show. Then Jerry locked the guns up in his desk. Tourists will pick up anything that ain't nailed down. That day, same as always, Bill and me left the guns with Jerry and went out to help with the Stagecoach Ride."

"Then you left those guns on your desk and took off, Mr. Frank?"

"I was only gone a minute or two," he said. "The employee's rest room is a step down the hall. We keep it locked because, sometimes, visitors do wander back here. We have other facilities for them."

"Anyone could have come into the office while you were down the hall and exchanged those blanks. The hall makes a bend there so you wouldn't have seen them?"

I couldn't stand the suffering look on Frank's face. Neither could Charity. She stepped over

to Frank's side and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Hell," I said. "We never thought of them as guns. They was props, like the sheriff badges we wear when we ride down Main Street with the posse."

"Any of you could have come back when you saw Mr. Frank leave the office? You must have known he wasn't too careful with those 'props.' You could have had bullets ready."

"Well, I didn't," I said, disgusted at having to go over all this again.

"Nor I," said Charity, patting Frank's shoulder.

"Or I did it and didn't go to the rest room at all," Frank said in a tight, thin voice.

"Hell, Lieutenant, none of us got any reason to kill Bill," I said.

"Some people in town don't think so, Conley. They say you were jealous of Bill, that you caught him and Mrs. Frank in the barn in a, well, compromising position."

This was a new line of attack that none of us were expecting. I thought Jerry Frank would explode. "That's a goddamned lie! Those gossipy, small town bitches! I'm not an old time resident, but even I know that a pass from Bill didn't mean a thing!"

I didn't know what the hell

they were talking about, but it could- of been. Maharg had dropped Charity like a hot branding iron a couple of years ago, but she was a married woman now, and if she was alone in the barn. . . .

"Besides, they didn't even get their facts straight," Frank said. "Dan didn't find them in the barn. I did. My wife told me what happened. Bill came up behind her and pushed her down into the hay. I believe her. Hell, if I hadn't, I'd a fired him."

"Of course," Charity said. "It was just Bill's idea of a joke. Everybody knows that."

I could see she was mad. Bill Maharg must of spread the story all over town. It was a cinch Charity and Jerry Frank wouldn't of said nothing, but Maharg liked to brag.

I knew what that stupid cop was thinking, that Jerry Frank shot Bill Maharg over Charity, but I knew how wrong he was. Frank would believe Charity, and he wouldn't have done nothing to hurt Old Town, even if he was jealous. Old Town was his life. Maharg's death had really shook Frank. He had closed up the biggest tourist attraction in Arizona, and I knew he needed that visitor money to make his payments at the bank.

I was furious with the

lieutenant for making it even harder for the poor guy. Besides I didn't like the idea of the lieutenant linking my name with Charity's. That gave me a motive, too. I figured that cop was just trying to get us fighting among ourselves. Maybe he thought we was all in it together.

I LAY IN BED that night, unable to sleep, thinking about Charity and Frank all alone out there in that ghostly, new-old place. I heard the sharp, clinking sound of pebbles on my window. I knew it must be Charity because it was what she and I used to do as kids when we wanted to sneak out and go early morning rabbit shooting.

I looked out the window, and it was Charity all right, dressed in shorts and a red bandanna halter. I threw on some old jeans and a shirt and ran downstairs.

"Charity, why are you. . . ." I started to say.

Her fingers over my lips stopped me. I followed her down the dark street to an alley where she had parked her pick-up. She motioned for me to drive. I was glad to get behind the wheel because she had this funny look on her face, and her hands were shaking.

"Jerry's gone crazy!" Charity

said. "He says he's going to shoot himself"

"What for?"

Charity put her head down into her hands. Her voice sounded odd, muffled by her fingers. I could see a brown eye looking sideways at me between thumb and forefinger.

"Jerry says that detective today was right, that he knew all along Bill and me were lovers. Jerry says he killed Bill and now he is going to kill himself and me, too."

"That's crazy!" I turned my head to stare at her.

The eye between the slit made by her fingers seemed to darken and grow cloudy. Her laugh was wild, broken by small, gulping sounds. "Isn't it though? Bill and me! I told you Jerry was crazy."

The truck bumped over some rocks. I tore my eyes away from Charity and back to the twin tunnels of light ahead. I pulled the truck back onto the highway.

"Jerry's been stalking me down the street at Old Town from one store to another. I got away and ran to the pick-up. I'm scared, Dan."

"We'll go get Sheriff Painter."

"We haven't got time!" Charity took her hands away from her face. "We might be too late even now."

At that I floorboarded the pedal. We shot ahead, the old pick-up rattling and shaking. Poor old Jerry, I thought, he's really flipped. It was hard to believe he'd killed Maharg, but he had changed from the day of the shooting, closing up Old Town, and hiding out there with Charity.

When we got to Old Town, I cut the motor and the lights and coasted the pick-up under the fake adobe wall. Charity and I jumped out, flattened ourselves into the shadows of the wall, and worked our way to the big, wooden gates she had left open when she drove out to get me.

We peeked around the gates and stared down the dirt street of Old Town. Bright moonlight lit up the center of the deserted roadway and melted away into the shadows under the overhangs above the plank sidewalk. Out on the desert a coyote flung his howl against the silence. Above the shingled roofs, the blue-black sky seemed to vibrate in the stillness with stars so thick and close it seemed you could gather them by the handful.

"Jerry," I called. "It's me, Dan. Where are you?"

I could hear Charity's rasping breath beside me, but she didn't say nothing. I knew why. My throat was so tight and my

mouth so dry it was hard to push out words.

"Jerry, please come out into the street. I want to help you."

I could hear my heart pounding. Sweat made my forehead icy cold in the warm night. We're too late, I thought.

Charity and I began to creep along the wooden sidewalk, hugging the store fronts, keeping well back from the posts of the overhang until we were opposite the largest building of all, the Arizona Saloon.

I was breathing fast as if I had been running instead of sneaking along inch by inch. Was Frank out there in the darkness, waiting for us to step into his gunsight, or was he lying dead in one of the shadows? I don't know which I dreaded most. I guess, to be honest, I hoped to find him dead.

A dark shadow moved behind one of the Saloon's windows. I heard Charity's quick intake of breath and felt her move beside me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her reach between her breasts and bring a tiny gun out from her halter top. The sight of it scared me more than anything else that night. I suddenly realized I was unarmed.

"Dan, are you alone?" Frank's old, quavering voice from across the street made me

shake with a sudden chill. Charity and I shrank back against the wall behind us.

I forced the words from my throat. "Charity's—with me, Jerry. We want to. . ."

"Take her gun away from her, Dan!" The quaver was gone. Instinctively I obeyed the authority in his tones, turning toward Charity with my hand out. Charity pulled away from me, her eyes wild and dark in the white blur of her face.

"No! No!"

"Get it away from her! She killed Bill! She'll kill us, too!"

"I told you Jerry was crazy!" Charity swung the little gun toward the windows of the Saloon. "He killed Bill. Shoot him, Dan, before he kills us both!"

"I haven't got a gun!"

"No gun?" There was shock in Charity's voice. She turned to stare at my empty hands, the little gun swinging around to point at me.

"Dan!" Frank's voice cut through the night like a butcher knife. "Listen to me! Charity put those bullets in your gun. I saw her coming out of the office that day."

"He's nuts! I wasn't there. Anyone could have been in the office while he was gone."

"I saw her, Dan! I forgot my key and was coming back for it. I was just turning the corner of



the hall. She must have heard me coming because she dashed out and was stuffing something down the front of her costume. You lied to the police and said you weren't there, but I saw you, honey."

"He's lying. I wasn't there!"

My hand was still held out for the gun. "Give it to. . ."

Frank's voice interrupted me. "Dan. Watch her! She's dangerous!"

I saw the flash, heard the sharp sound. Charity had whirled and fired at the shadow in the window across the way. I grappled with her, pushing her to the boardwalk.

We fought silently except for the gasping of our breath. Big as I am, it was like mixing with a wildcat. I felt cloth tear in my hands. Charity squirmed away from me, half fell down the single step, then was up and running across the street.

I ran after her, saw the saloon's double doors swing inward as she dashed through them. I didn't even feel them as they swung back and hit me. A dark shape detached itself from beneath the front window and joined me as I ran up the stairs after Charity.

Frank and I reached the top of the stairs when we heard the shot. We burst out upon the balcony where Charity had stood so often, screaming, as

Maharg and I had stalked the street below.

Tonight there were no screams, only an empty, swishing kind of sound as she fell to the balcony floor. There was a strange gurgling from her throat and the sharp clack of the gun as it fell from her mouth and struck the wooden floor.

Frank was before me, cradling Charity in his arms, not heeding the blood pouring across his shirt front. I felt my stomach heave and retched as I knelt down beside them.

The old man was crying. I watched, fascinated and numb as the tears caught in the channels of his wrinkles and ran down, dropping off his chin.

"I loved her, Dan. I was too old for a pretty, young girl like Charity. She loved Bill, had loved him for so long. When I found them together, I offered to give her a divorce, but Bill didn't want her. He laughed at us, stalked out of the barn. . ."

"You let them think I killed him when you knew all along it was Charity!"

"I couldn't bear the idea of Charity in jail or a . . . mental hospital. I knew they couldn't pin it on you."

I stared at him across Charity's body. "But you let her come after me tonight?"

He shook his head. I felt a

drop of moisture splash on my hand. "I didn't know Charity had gone to town. I was upset tonight . . . after what the lieutenant said. Bill must have talked. I told Charity I'd seen her coming out of the office that day. She came after me with her gun. I ran and hid in the barn. She was laughing . . . crazy laughing, Dan!"

The little man shuddered, making Charity's body shake with an almost lifelike motion. I shrank back from the pair of them.

"She shouted that she was going to go get matches. I thought she was going to burn the barn down around me. I sneaked out, worked my way down the street toward the trucks. I went slow. I thought she was still out there, somewhere in the dark, waiting for me with her gun. . . ."

"God," I said. "She brought

me here to shoot you . . . with my gun. They'd be sure, then, that I killed Bill, too. Who'd believe me?"

Thankfully, the right people did believe me—with Frank's word to back me up.

Sometimes I go out to Old Town. Frank left me the keys when he went back East. Lightning has burnt down the old Jail, leaving a gap like a missing tooth between the buildings. Dust storms have erased most of the lettering on the wooden fronts. Winds have loosened the shutters and shakes. Tumbleweeds roll in the dust of the deserted street day and night.

I stand in front of the Arizona Saloon at the place where Bill Maharg died and look up to the balcony above. It seems to me I can still hear Charity screaming. I am glad to get back to the cafe.



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Tired Old Man

A "Different" Story



by Harlan Ellison

Marki was long dead, a ghost at the feast, a tissue of falsehoods. But underneath his fabulous fancies lay the magical reality of revelatory truth.

THE HELL OF IT is, you're never so tough as you think you are. There's always somebody with sad eyes who'll shoot you down when you're not even looking, when you're combing your hair, tying your shoelace. Down you go, like a wounded rhino, nowhere near as tough as you thought.

I came in from the Coast on a Wednesday, got myself locked up in the Warwick to finish the book, did it, called the messenger and had him take the manuscript over to Wyeth the following Tuesday, and I was free. Only nine months late, but it was an-okay piece of work. It was going to be at least three days till I got the call telling me what alterations he wanted—there were three chapters dead in the middle I knew he'd balk at—I'd cheated on the psychiatric rationale for the brother-in-law's actions,

had held back some stuff I knew Wyeth would demand I flesh out—and so I had time to kill.

I've got to remember to remind myself—if I ever use that phrase again, may my carbons always be reversed. Time to kill. Yeah, just the phrase.

I called Bob Catlett, thinking we'd get together for dinner with his wife, the psychiatrist, if he was still seeing her. He said we could set it up for that night and by the way, why didn't I come along for the monthly meeting of The Cerberus Club.

I choked back a string of uglies. "I don't think so, man. They give me a pain in the ass."

The Cerberus is a "writers' club" of old pros who've been around since Clarence Budington Kelland was breaking in at Munsey's *Cavalier*. And

what had been a fairly active group of working professionals in the Fifties and Sixties was now a gaggle of burnt-out cases and gossips, drinking too much and lamenting the passing of Ben Hibbs at the *Saturday Evening Post*.

I was thirty years past that time, a young punk by their lights, and I saw no merit whatsoever in spending an evening up to my hips in dull chatter and weariness, gagging on cigaret smoke and listening to septuageneric penny-a-word losers comparing the merits of *Black Mask* to those of *Weird Tales*.

So he talked me into it. That's what friends are for.

We had dinner at an Argentinian restaurant off Times Square—and with my belly full of skirt steak and bread pudding I felt up to it. We arrived at the traditional meeting-place—the claustrophobic apartment of a sometime-editor who had once been a reader for Book-of-the-Month Club—around nine-thirty. It was packed from wall to wall.

I hadn't seen most of them in ten years, since I'd gone to the Coast to adapt *The Stalking Man* for Paramount. It had been a good ten years for me. I'd left New York with a molehill of unpaid bills the creditors were rapidly turning into

a mountain, and such despair both personally and professionally I'd half accepted the idea I'd never really make a decent living at writing.

But doing four months' work each year in films and television had provided the cushion so I could spend eight months of the year working on books. I was free of debt, twenty pounds heavier, secure for the first time in my life, even reasonably happy. But walking into that apartment was like walking back into a corporeal memory of the dismal past. Nothing had changed. They were all there, and all the same.

My first impression was of lines of weariness.

Someone had superimposed a blueprint on the room and its occupants. In the background were all the moving figures, older and more threadbare than the last time I'd seen them gathered together in a room like this, moving (it seemed, oddly) a good deal more slowly than they should have been. As if they were imbedded in amber. Not slow motion, merely an altered index of the light-admitting properties of the lenses of my eyes. Out of synch with their voices.

But in the foreground, much sharper and brighter than the colors of the people or the room, was an overlay of lines of wear-

riness. Gray and blue lines that were not merely topographically superimposed over faces and hands, and the elbows of the women, but over the entire room—lines rising off toward the ceiling, laid against the lamps and chairs, dividing the carpet into sections.

I walked through, between and among the blue and gray lines, finding it difficult to breathe as the oppressiveness of massed failure and dead dreams assaulted me. It was like breathing the dust of ancient tombs.

Bob Catlett and his wife had immediately wandered off to the kitchen for drinks. I would have scurried after them but Leo Norris saw me, shoved between two ex-technical writers (each of whom had had brief commercial successes twenty years before with non-fiction popularizations of space science theory) and grabbed my hand. He looked exhausted, but sober.

"Billy! For God's sake, Billy! I didn't know you were in town. What a great thing! How long're you in for?"

"Only a few days, Leo. Book for Harper. I've been all locked up finishing it."

"Well, I'll say this for you—the Scott Fitzgerald Syndrome certainly hasn't hit you out there. How many is it since you left, three? Four?"



"Seven."

He smiled with embarrassment, but not enough embarrassment to slow the phony camaraderie. Leo Norris and I—despite his effusions—had never been close. When was already an established novelist, a fact one verified by getting one's name on the cover of *The Saint Detective Magazine*, I was banging off hammer murder novelets for *Manhunt*, just to pay the rent in the Village. There had been no camaraderie in those days.

But Leo was on the slide, had been for the last six or eight years, was reduced to writing a series of sex/spy/violence paperbacks, each one numbered (he was up to #27 the last time I looked), pseudonymous, featuring an unpleasant CIA thug named Curt Costener. Four of my last seven novels had been translated into successful films

and one of them had become a television series. Camaraderie.

"Seven books in what—ten years?—that's damned good."

I didn't say anything. I was looking around, indicating I wanted to move on. He didn't pick up the message.

"Brett McCoy died, you know. Last week."

I nodded. I'd read him, but had never met him. Good writer. Police procedurals.

"Terminal. Inoperable. Lungs—really spread. Oh, he'd been on the way out for a long time. He'll be missed."

"Yeah. Well, excuse me, Leo, I have to find some people I came with."

I couldn't get through the press near the front door to join Bob in the kitchen. The only breeze was coming in from the hallway and they were jammed together in front of the passage. So I went the other way, deeper into the room, deeper into the inversion layer of smoke and monotoned chatter. He watched me go, wanting to say something, probably wanting to strengthen a bond that didn't exist. I moved fast. I didn't want any more obituary reports.

There were only five or six women in the crowd, as far as I could tell. One of them watched me as I edged through the bodies. I couldn't help noticing

her noticing me. She was in her late forties, severely weathered, staring openly as I neared her.

It wasn't till she said, "Billy?" that I recognized the voice. Not the face—even then, not the face. Just the voice, which hadn't changed.

I stopped and stared back. "Dee?"

She smiled no kind of smile at all, a mere stricture of courtesy. "How are you, Billy?"

"I'm fine. How're you? What's happening, what're you doing these days?"

"I'm living in Woodstock. Cormick and I got divorced, I'm doing books for Avon."

I hadn't seen anything with her name on it for some time. Those who haunt the newsstands and bookstores out of years of habit are, like sidewalk café Greeks, unable to stop fingering their worry beads. I would have seen her name.

She caught the hesitation. "Gothics. I'm doing them under another name."

This time the smile was nasty and it said, *You've had the last laugh. Yes, I'm selling my talent cheap. I hate myself for it. I'll slice my wrists in this conversation before I'll permit you to gloat.*

What's more offensive than being successful when they always dismissed you as the least

of their set and they've dribbled away all the promise and have failed? Nothing. They would eat the air you breathe. Bierce: SUCCESS, *n.* The one unpardonable sin against one's fellows. Unquote.

"Look me up if you get to Los Angeles," I said. She didn't even want to try that one. She turned back to the three-way conversation behind her. She took the arm of an elegant man with a thick, gray mop of styled Claude Rains hair. He was wearing aviator-style eyeglasses, wraparounds tinted auburn. Dee hung on tight. That wouldn't last long. His suits were too well-tailored. She looked like a tattered battle flag. *When had they all settled for oblivion?*

Edwin Charrel was coming toward me from the opposite side of the room. He still owed me sixty dollars from ten years before. He wouldn't have forgotten. He'd lay a long, guilt-oozing story on me and try to press a five into my hand. Not now, *really*, not now—not on top of Leo Norris and Dee Miller and all those crinkled elbows.

I turned a hard right, smiled at a mom-and-pop writing team sharing the same glass of vodka and worked my way to the wall. I kept to the outside and began to circumnavigate. My

mission—to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. Everyone knows it's harder to hit a moving target.

And miles to go before I sleep.

The back wall was dominated by a sofa jammed with loud conversations. But the crowd in the center of the room had its collective back to the babble, so there was a clear channel across to the other side. I made the move. Charrel wasn't even in sight, so I made the move. No one noticed, no one gave a gardsloo, no one tried to buttonhole me. I thought I was halfway home. I started to turn the corner, only one wall to go before the breeze, the door and out. That was when the old man motioned to me from the easy chair.

The chair was wedged into the rear corner of the room, at an angle to the sofa. Big, overstuffed, colorless thing. He was deep in the cushions. Thin, wasted, tired-looking, eyes a soft, watery blue. He was motioning to me. I looked behind me, turned back. He was motioning to me. I walked over and stood there above him.

"Sit down."

There wasn't anywhere to sit. "I was just leaving." I didn't know him.

"Sit down—we'll talk. There's time."

A spot opened at the end of the sofa. It would have been rude to walk away. He nodded his head at it. So I sat down. He was the most exhausted looking old man I'd ever seen. Just stared at me.

"So you write a little," he said. I thought he was putting me on. I smiled, and he said, "What's your name?"

I said, "Billy Landress."

He tested that for a moment, silently. "William. On the books it's William."

I chuckled. "That's right. William on the books. It's better for the lending libraries. Classifier. Weightier." I couldn't stop smiling and laughing softly. Not to myself, right into his face. He didn't smile back, but I knew he wasn't taking offense. It was a bemusing conversation.

"And you're...?"

"Marki Strasser," he said.

Still smiling, I said, "Is that the name you write under?"

He shook his head. "I don't write any more. I haven't written in a long time."

"Marki," I said, lingering on the word, "Marki. I don't think I've read any of your work. Mystery fiction?"

"Primarily. Suspense, a few contemporary novels, nothing terribly significant. But tell me about you."

I settled back into the sofa. "I

have the feeling, sir, that you're amused by me."

His soft, blue eyes stared back at me without a trace of guile. There was no smile anywhere in that face. Tired—old and terribly tired. "We're *all* amusing, William. Except when we get too old to take care of ourselves, when we get too old to keep up. Then we cease to be amusing. You don't want to talk about yourself?"

I spread my hands in surrender. I would talk about myself. He may have conceived of himself as too old to be amusing, but he was a fascinating old man nonetheless. He was a good listener. The rest of the room faded, and we talked. I told him about myself, about life on the Coast, the plots of my books in *précis*, what it took to adapt a suspense novel for the screen.

Body language is interesting. On the most primitive level, even those unfamiliar with the unconscious messages the positions of the arms and legs and torso give, can perceive what's going on. When two people are talking and one is trying to get across an important point to the other, the one making the point leans forward. The one resisting the point leans back.

I realized I was leaning far forward and to the side, resting my chest on the arm of the so-

fa. He wasn't sinking too far back in the soft cushions of the easy chair, but he was back. He was listening to me, taking in everything I was saying, but it was as though he knew it was all past, all dead information, as though he was waiting to tell me some things I needed to know.

Finally, he said, "Have you noticed how many of the stories you've written are concerned with relationships of fathers to sons?"

I'd noticed. "My father died when I was very young," I said and felt the usual tightness in my chest. "Somewhere, I don't remember where, I stumbled on a line Faulkner wrote once, where he said, something like, 'No matter what a writer writes about, if it's a man, he's writing about the search for his father.' It hit me particularly hard.

"I'd never realized how much I missed him until one night just a few years ago, I was in a group encounter session and we were told by the leader of the group to pick one person out of the circle and make that person someone we wanted to talk to, someone we'd never been able to talk to, and to tell that person everything we'd always wanted to say. I picked a man with a mustache and talked to him the way I'd never been able to talk to my father when

I was a very little boy. After a little bit I was crying."

I paused, then said very softly, "I didn't even cry at my father's funeral. It was a very strange thing, a disturbing evening."

I paused again and collected my thoughts. This was becoming a good deal heavier, more personal, than I'd anticipated. "Then, just a year or two ago, I found that quote by Faulkner—and it all fitted into place."

The tired old man kept watching me. "What did you tell him?"

"Who? Oh, the man with the mustache? *Hmmm*. Well, it wasn't anything that potent. I just told him I'd made it, that he would be proud of me now, that I had succeeded, that I was a good guy and—he'd be proud of me. That was all."

"What *didn't* you tell him?"

I felt myself twitch with the impact of the remark. He had said it so casually, yet the force of the question jammed a cold chisel into the door of my memory, applied sudden pressure and snapped the lock. The door sprang open and guilt flooded out. How could Marki have known?

"Nothing. I don't know what you mean." I didn't recognize my voice.

"There must have been some-

thing. You're an angry man, William. You're angry at your father. Perhaps because he died and left you alone. But you didn't say something very important that you *needed* to say. You still need to say it. What was it?"

I didn't want to answer him. But he just waited. And finally I murmured, "He never said goodbye. He just died and never said goodbye to me." Silence. Then I shook, helplessly, trembled, reduced after so many years to a child, tried to shake it off, tried to dismiss it, and very quietly said, "It wasn't important."

"It wasn't important for him to hear it—but it was for you to say it." I couldn't look at him.

Then Marki said, "In the lens of time we are each seen as a diminishing mote. I'm sorry I upset you."

"You didn't upset me."

"Yes, I did. Let me try and make amends. If you have the time, let me tell you about a few books I wrote. You may enjoy this." So I sat back and he told me a dozen plots. He spoke without hesitations, fluidly, and they were awfully good. Excellent, in fact. Suspense stories, something in the vein of James M. Cain or Jim Thompson. Stories about average people, not private eyes or foreign agents, just people in stress

situations where violence and intrigue proceeded logically from entrapping circumstances.

I was fascinated. And what a talent he had for titles: *Dead by Morning*, *Cancel Bungalow 16*, *An Edge in My Voice*, *Whitemail*, *The Man Who Searched for Joy*, *The Diagnosis of Dr. Darque* ANGEL, *Prodigal Father* and one that somehow struck me so forcibly I made a mental note to contact Andreas Brown at the Gotham Book Mart, to locate a used copy for me through his antiquarian book sources. I had to read it. It was titled *Lover, Killer*.

When he stopped talking he looked even more exhausted than when he'd asked me to sit down. His skin was almost gray, and the soft blue eyes kept closing for moments at a time.

"Would you like a glass of water or something to eat?"

He looked at me carefully, and said, "Yes. I'd very much like a glass of water, thank you."

I got up, to force my way through to the kitchen.

He put his dry hand on mine. I looked down at him. "What do you want to be, eventually, William?"

I could have given a flip answer. I didn't. "Remembered," I said. Then he smiled and removed his hand.

"I'll get that water—be right back."

I pushed through the crowd and got to the kitchen. Bob was still there, arguing with Hans Santesson about cracking the pro rata share of royalties problem for reprints of stories in college-level text-anthologies. Hans and I shook hands, and exchanged quick pleasantries while I drew a glass of water and put in a couple of ice cubes from the pastic sack half-filled with melted cubes in the sink. I didn't want to leave Marki for very long.

"Where the hell have you been tonight?" Bob Catlatt asked.

"I'm sitting way at the back, with an old man—fascinating old man. Used to be a writer, he says. I don't doubt it. Jesus, he must have written some incredible books. Don't know how I could have missed them. I thought I'd read practically everything in the genre."

"What is his name?" Hans asked, with that soft lovely Scandinavian accent.

"Marki Strasser," I said. "What a goddam sensational story-sense he's got."

They were staring at me.

"Marki?" Hans had frozen, his cup of tea halfway to his lips.

"Marki Strasser," I said again. "What's the matter?"

"The only Marki I know who was a writer, was a man who used to come to these evenings thirty years ago. But he's been dead for at least fifteen—sixteen years."

I laughed. "Can't be the same one, unless you're wrong about his having died."

"No, I am certain about his death."

"Then it's someone else."

"Where's he sitting?" Bob asked.

I stepped out into the passage and motioned them to join me. I waited for the crowd to sway out of the way for a moment, and pointed. "There, back in the corner, in the big easy chair."

There was no one in the big easy chair. It was empty. And as I stared, and they stood behind me, staring, a woman sat down in the chair and went to sleep, a cocktail glass in her hand. "He got up and moved somewhere else in the room," I said.

He hadn't, of course. We were the last to go. I wouldn't leave. I watched each person pass out through the front door, standing right in front of the door so no one could get past me. Bob checked out the toilet. He wasn't in there. There was only one exit from the apartment, and I was in front of it.

"Listen, godammit," I said

heatedly, to Hans and Bob and our host, who wanted desperately to vomit and go to bed, "I do *not* believe in ghosts. He *wasn't* a ghost, he *wasn't* a figment of my imagination, he *wasn't* a fraud, for God's sake I'm not *that* gullible I can't tell when I'm being put on. This was no put-on.

"Those stories he told me were too damned good—and if he was here, how the hell did he get out past me? I was right in front of the door even when I came to the kitchen to get the water. He was an *old* man, at least seventy, maybe older. He wasn't a goddam sprinter! *Nobody* could have gotten through that crowd fast enough to slip out into the hall behind me without banging into everyone, and *someone* would have remembered being pushed like that, so . . ."

Hans tried to calm me. "Billy, we asked everyone who was here. No one else saw him. No one even saw you sitting on the sofa there, where you say you were sitting. No one else spoke to anyone like that, and many of the writers here tonight *knew* him. Why would a man tell you he was Marki Strasser if he was *not* Marki Strasser? He would have known that a room filled with writers who *knew* Marki Strasser would tell you if it was a joke."

I wouldn't let go of it. I was *not* hallucinating!

Our host went digging around in a back closet and came up with a bound file of old Mystery Writers of America programs from Edgar Award dinners. He flipped through them, back fifteen years, and found a photograph of Marki Strasser. I looked at it. The photo was clear and sharp. It wasn't the same man.

There was no way of confusing the two, even adding fifteen years to the face in the picture, even allowing for a severe debilitation from sickness. The Marki in the photograph was a round-faced man, almost totally bald, with thick eyebrows and dark eyes. The Marki I had talked to for almost an hour had had soft, blue eyes. Even if he had been wearing a hairpiece, those eyes couldn't be mistaken.

"It's not him, dammit!"

They asked me to describe him again. When that didn't connect, Hans asked me to tell him the stories and the titles. The three of them listened and I could see from their faces that they were as impressed with the books Marki had written as I was. But when I ran down and sat there, breathing hard, Hans and my host shook their heads.

"Billy," Hans said, "I was the

editor of the Unicorn Mystery Book Club for seven years; I edited *The Saint Detective Magazine* for more than ten. I have read as widely in the field of mystery fiction as anyone alive. No such books exist."

Our host, an authority on the subject, agreed.

I looked at Bob Catlett. He devoured them a book a day. Slowly, reluctantly, he nodded his head in agreement.

I sat there and closed my eyes.

After a little while, Bob suggested we go. His wife had vanished an hour earlier with a group intent on getting cheesecake. He wanted to get to bed. I didn't know what to do. So I went back to the Warwick.

That night I pulled an extra blanket onto the bed, but still it was cold, very cold, and I shivered. I left the television set on, nothing but snow and a steady humming. I couldn't sleep.

Finally, I got up and got dressed and went out into the street. Fifty-fourth Street was empty and silent at three in the morning. Not even delivery trucks and, though I looked and looked for him, I couldn't find him.

I thought about it endlessly, walking, and for a while I imag-

ined he had been my father, come back from the grave to talk to me. But it wasn't my father. I would have recognized him. I'm no fool, I would have recognized him. My father had been a much shorter man, with a mustache—and he had never spoken like that, in that way, with those words and those cadences.

It wasn't the almost-forgotten mystery novelist known as Marki Strasser. Why he had used that name, I don't know, but it had not been Marki Strasser. I didn't know who he was.

I came back to the Warwick and rang for the elevator. I stood in front of the mirrored panel between the two elevator doors, and I stared through my own reflection, into the glass, looking for an answer.

Then I went up to my room and sat down at the writing desk and rolled a clean sandwich of white bond, carbon, and yellow second sheet into the portable.

I began writing *Lover, Killer*.

It came easily. No one else could write that book. No one else knew it.

But, like my father, he hadn't even said goodbye when I went to get him that glass of water. That tired old man.

THE KRIS KRINGLE CAPER

Stanley never did anything right until he robbed the bank. Even then he managed to foul things up.

by A. F. ORESHNIK



THE CHEAP BRASS ALARM clock sounded at 7:30 in the morning, and Stanley Blatt allowed his eyelids to crack open for a moment. Then he rolled onto his

stomach, drew his knees up under him, and crawled to the edge of the bed. He straightened and stepped out from under the covers and onto the cold linoleum before opening his eyes again.

He padded across the bedroom, banging into a chair with a red-and-white Santa Claus costume draped over it, before stumbling down the chill hallway to the bathroom, wearing nothing but his shorts. He splashed cold water from the hot-water tap onto his face and brushed his teeth to remove the fur he was certain covered them.

Next, he unscrewed the cap from the mouthwash bottle and took a swig. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut while he waited for the cheap bourbon to reach his stomach. When it did and the warmth began to spread, he opened his eyes again. He had gotten into the habit of filling the mouthwash bottle with whiskey back in the days when he was married, and the custom had lasted longer than any of his wives.

"Somehow," he once told an acquaintance, "it tastes better when you sneak it."

Despite his efforts to rouse himself fully, sleep continued to exert a grip on him. This wasn't unusual. Stanley Blatt was a night person. He always

seemed to drag his feet by day, but as soon as the sun went down, it was as though he had been shot full of some powerful stimulant. Any winking neon sign held more attraction for him than sunshine. His first wife, the one he always thought of as the woman with the smart mouth, used to tell people the only way he'd ever die was with a wooden stake through his heart.

His second wife had been equally rotten. In front of a divorce court packed with spectators, she had said he was an alcoholic, said the booze had pickled his brain. She told everyone that he was the kind of person who could learn all the facts about something and still not understand the basics of it. If he were to build a boat, it would be perfect except it wouldn't float. It had been over five years since she'd said it, but he was still trying to puzzle that out.

"How come it wouldn't float if I built it right?" he often asked.

However, he was no longer trying to figure out how he could rob the town's bank and get away with it because he had already found a way. He had been thinking about it for years, so it was only right that his mental efforts should be rewarded. Of course he had time to think and scheme

nowadays—much more than ever before. Working as a part-time janitor and handyman at four of the town's bars gave him a lot of time to sit and drink and think.

At first he had tried to plan a burglary, a crime where no one would see him. That seemed to be a basic requirement, because there probably wasn't one of the town's 20,000 residents who didn't know him. If he could be a faceless shadow, like one of the jewel thieves he'd seen in movies and read about in books, it would be perfect.

Unfortunately, a bank Burglar must know something about vaults and safes. He must also have knowledge of, and skill with, tools. Stanley would have had trouble breaking into a piggy bank, and he didn't know a hammer from a screwdriver. He had to find another way.

He had thought of staging a holdup dozens of times and always rejected it. He was certain to be recognized and captured later even if he made good his escape from the bank. However, when the radio began to play Christmas music this year, and the stores along Broad Street decorated their windows for the holiday season, he suddenly realized what a perfect disguise a Santa Claus costume would be. His face and head would be almost completely covered by

the white beard, wig and red hat. The heavy padding he'd need would change the shape of his torso. The sack over his shoulder would be perfect for carrying away the loot.

Stanley acted upon the idea immediately. He hitchhiked to Mercerville, the nearest large city. Once there, he bought a used Santa Claus costume and an old double-barrelled, 12-gauge shotgun with a handful of shells. He packed it all into a large cardboard box and took the bus home.

Now, when he emerged from the bathroom, he went directly to the costume that lay waiting for him on the bedroom chair. He put on the thickly padded vest, then pulled on the red trousers. He sat on the chair and forced his bare feet into the black plastic boots he would wear. He didn't have any socks, but it was just as well. The boots were a size too small and pinched his toes. Wearing socks, he might not have been able to get them on. He got up and stomped his feet, but that didn't make the boots fit any better. Next, he put on the red coat and stood in front of the wardrobe mirror to adjust his white wig and beard.

"You won't be going down any chimney today," he told his reflection.

So far, so good. He looked at

his wrist watch. It was still early, so he returned to the bathroom for another swallow of bourbon. Then he sat on the chair in the bedroom. As he waited, he went over in his mind for the thousandth time each well-thought-out step of the bank robbery plan.

The bank opened for business at 8:30. At nine o'clock, Stanley Blatt got the shotgun from the closet. Its barrel had been cut down to 15 inches, the stock reduced to little more than a pistol grip. It looked exactly like one he'd seen in a detective magazine. Stanley slid the weapon into his Santa Claus sack, swung the bag over his shoulder and left the house through the rear door.

He crossed the backyard, leaving tracks in the ankle-deep snow, and ducked into the opening between his garage and that of a neighbor. He emerged in the narrow alley that ran the length of the block. He turned right and began walking along one of the twin paths made by automobile tires. When he reached the first street, he paused until there was no one in sight before sprinting across it to the next alley and again walking in the tire track where he'd leave no trail.

He traveled three blocks through back alleys, then

forced himself to break out of his habitual stumbling gait as he joined the pedestrians on a side street. He didn't want anyone to recognize him from his walk.

There were more children about than he'd seen on any of the mornings that he had made trial runs. It was the holiday vacation. He had forgotten that. He hoped it wouldn't affect the bank's normal routine. By eleven o'clock the early-morning rush was usually over, and the manager and his two tellers didn't have half a dozen customers until the noon rush began.

After following the side street for a few blocks, he reached Broad Street. The stores were open and shoppers were busy exchanging Christmas presents and buying gifts for friends they had missed. Here again there were more children, each with a ready smile and wave of the hand for Santa. He waved back and kept going uttering an occasional, "Ho-ho-ho!"

When he reached the bank, he glanced inside through the front window. There was only one customer. He pushed past the double set of swinging doors and joined him.

Ten minutes later, the bank manager, tellers and lone customer were locked inside the vault and Stanley had fled back to the street with his sack filled

with currency. He had been careful to speak in as gruff a tone as possible and never called anyone by name. The police might think it was the work of a passing professional, rather than a desperate local resident—he hoped.

He hurried along Broad Street with his sack, still careful to walk far more briskly than normal, and swung his free arm when he wasn't using it to return friendly greeting. He heard no sirens or shouts, so the alarm wasn't out yet. He felt a strong urge to look over his shoulder at the street behind him, but he didn't. He had expected this feeling, and he knew it could be fatal to his plan if he gave in to it.

A Santa Claus at Christmas season is no more memorable than a postman at any other time of the year, but a Santa Claus who is seen glancing furtively behind him might well be recalled later when news of the robbery spread. He didn't want anyone remembering him or the direction he had gone.

He turned at the sidestreet

and kept going. He picked up his pace and took longer strides. His feet were freezing in the plastic boots. By the time he reached the first alley, he was nearly running.

He passed no one before reaching his own backyard and gaining the safety of his house. He leaned against the closed door and sighed with relief. Then he hurried to the bathroom and the mouthwash bottle.

The doorbell rang half an hour later and he answered it, barefoot and wearing a tattered robe. One of the detectives snapped handcuffs onto his wrists while the other two rushed past him. It didn't take them long to find the Santa Claus suit stuffed under the bed or the pile of currency heaped in the middle of it.

"How—how did you find me?" Stanley wanted to know.

"The kids told us where you were," a detective answered.

"Kids?"

"Yeah. You overlooked something—children will follow Santa Claus," he said.

COMING SOON: A TRULY BRILLIANT NEW NOVELET

By JERRY JACOBSON

A Stitch in Time



Pedro was willing to sacrifice his sister to the cause—but she had no desire to sacrifice her life.

by

HERBERT HARRIS

IT WAS THE STRANGEST trio of people you could ever hope to see in your life . . .

The lovely Juanita, quietly sewing; her rich black hair cascading over the satiny olive-hued shoulders as she bent intently over her needlework box . . .

Myself, watching her long tapering fingers with a strange fascination, sitting a short distance apart from her, wishing I were a hell of a lot closer and enjoying yet again the warm honey-sweetness of her kisses . . .

And, the third one, her

brother Pedro, smartly turned out in his dark-green army uniform, but one of the toughest and most determined of the Freedom Fighters.

A gun—one of the many pieces of armament supplied to him and his kind by the gun-runners—lay on a table in front of him. One hasty move from me, and he would not flinch from putting a hole through my chest, and I would be filing no more stories from the world's hotspots to the newspaper I served . . .

The sudden arrival of Pedro Lerida had been unexpected. A

hell of a nuisance at the same time, because I had felt that this would be the moment to ask Juanita Lerida to return to England with me.

Her home, where we sat, was her father's place. The house of General Don Jose Lerida, a smallish white stucco villa baked and bleached by the merciless sun of strife-torn Manuella.

Her father had suddenly disappeared a day or two before. It was reliably reported that he had now taken over command of the anti-Government majority of the army—the Freedom Army.

Juanita had been alone when I first got to the villa. She rushed into my arms; her huge, dark eyes telling me how much she now hated the fear and the plotting and the violence which tore her small country apart...

"It's no longer safe for you here, Juanita," I told her, crushing her soft, trembling body protectively against my own.

"It is no longer safe for anyone," she said, her young face, though calm and dignified, showing signs of overwhelming strain. "Not even you."

"Oh, especially me," I told her with a grim smile. "I am now in the position of those other 'political prisoners', rotting in stinking cells because

they happen to know too much."

"How do you mean... you know too much?"

So then I told Juanita how I had stumbled across the Freedom Army's most important secret store of arms at the big Castello Cemetery.

Coffins were taken up, the bodies disposed of, and all kinds of light arms—supplied by the international gun-runners—packed into the coffins and lowered back into the graves to await the Freedom Army's D-Day.

The trouble was that they knew I knew, and, as I told Juanita, that made me a marked man.

"You are foolish to have come here!" she exclaimed tensely. "They know that you want me to go away with you... that this is the most likely place to find you."

And even as she spoke, there was an ominous rustling in the dry ferns outside. We knew that we had company.

"Pedro!" Juanita whispered as her brother appeared, framed in the doorway.

I looked ruefully at the gun in his hand and knew that any opposition was null and void as from now.

Pedro was gazing at me with a look half pitying, half contemptuous. He was tall, good-

looking, and, as I said before, quite smartly turned out in his dark-green army uniform.

Presently he said what I had guessed he would say. "My father, General Don Jose Lerida, has commanded me to take you into custody."

I smiled bleakly, playing for time a little. "I always guessed he wouldn't approve of me as a possible son-in-law, but I didn't think he would go quite so far as to start shooting." I glanced pointedly at the gun.

"You have been seen spying in the Castello Cemetery, señor. You obviously know that this is our main store of arms. We cannot allow you to remain free with that secret."

In the normally tranquil eyes of Juanita there flashed a glint of flame. "You will have to leave *me* to rot in one of your stinking dungeons, too!"

Pedro answered calmly: "It is for the General to decide how you will pay for your folly."

Juanita rose and moved quietly and gracefully across the room. Pedro's eyes followed her every movement as she opened the door of a small cabinet.

Was she going to try something rash? I thought desperately, don't let her!

"If I'm to go with you, Pedro, it is necessary that I carry out a small repair to my skirt. You

will not object to my keeping you for a moment?" Again that hint of sarcasm.

"Take as long as you like," Pedro told her. "I have had a tiring day and can do with a rest. Besides, if it should be getting dark when we leave, that is all to the good. We prefer to work at night."

He pulled a chair up to a table that stood a respectable way away from myself and Juanita. The table made a useful barrier between us.

He placed the gun on the table's polished top, positioned so that he could snatch it up with one flick of his hand.

I dismissed such reckless thoughts and turned my attention to Juanita. She had seated herself on a small chair with its back turned towards her brother, and placed a needlework basket on a small table before her.

I saw her hands opening the basket. My stomach was all screwed up. Suppose, I thought suddenly, she whips out a gun? She would never stand a chance. I just couldn't stand seeing her get hurt. The sweat rippled down my back under my shirt.

Pedro whipped off the dark-green officer's jacket. He threw it across to her, and it dropped by the side of her chair.

"I am losing a button, and

there is an untidy gash in one sleeve." Pedro told her. "While you have your needlework things handy, I would be obliged if you would mend them for me."

He laughed briefly and mirthlessly as she picked up the jacket. "Like the old days, eh?—the better days?" he added.

Juanita made no reply. She didn't even turn to look at him. She merely bent over her needles and cottons with the quiet calm of a martyr.

After what seemed like a century, Juanita finished stitching. She rose slowly and gracefully from her chair and took the army jacket across to Pedro and laid it on the table in front of him.

She made no remark at all. Her brother watched her return to her chair and sit down with her hands folded in her lap. Then he swallowed and said: "Thank you, Sister... thank you very much."

His eyes were on me as he snatched up the jacket and whipped it over his shoulders and simultaneously jammed both arms into the sleeves.

Suddenly he yelled out an obscene curse. His face had

turned a purplish red and he was waving his arms about like a helpless penguin.

I stared at him in bewilderment, my mouth open. It was Juanita who acted fast—but then she had known what was coming.

"Here!"—she thrust Pedro's gun into my hand. I had scarcely seen her pick it up from the table.

Gathering my wits, I snapped back: "Right!" I levelled the gun at Pedro. "Just stay there! Try following us and you know what you'll get!"

I hustled Juanita to my car, and within seconds had pointed its nose towards the frontier and safety. "That was hellishly bright," I said. "Stitching up his sleeves at the cuffs."

"Yes," she answered, "I suddenly remembered, as I began to sew, my brother's old habit of donning a jacket by sticking both arms into it at the same time. He has never lost that habit."

"Don't worry about *him*," I said. "He has plenty of friends to set him free. Real specialists in 'Freedom'," I added with a grim smile. "Soon *you* will be free, sweetheart... really free at last!"

COMING: THE MOTORMAN By STANLEY F. WITHE

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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JANUARY, 1976

SNOW JOB

by CARROLL MAYERS



Barney's getaway plan was foolproof—until Mother Nature stacked the deck against him.

WE HAD no particular destination. We'd been driving for six hours, fighting traffic in two states, and snow flurries were threatening an evening storm. We decided to stop over at Cedarsville. The town itself was not much—a dozen or so drowsy streets, a center mini-park with flagpole, a clutch of small shops and a movie.

Barney got us off on the wrong foot at the hotel, although I couldn't fault him. The desk clerk was a prissy character with a receding chin who'd likely had a bad night with a sluggish liver or a capricious girl friend. He appraised us as we approached with only one suitcase and became difficult.

"A single with twin beds, please," Barney said genially.

The clerk became absorbed in a card file, didn't immediately answer. Barney waited a moment, cleared his throat.

Finally, Weak Chin looked up. "Yes?"

Barney repeated his request, not as pleasantly. The clerk sized us up again, I thought I saw his nostrils twitch. "Just overnight?" he suggested.

Barney's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Hopefully," he rejoined.

The clerk's neck reddened. I sensed he would have liked to turn us away but hesitated to press his pique that far. His lips thinned as he pushed the register toward us, announced, "That will be twelve dollars—in advance."

Barney gave the screw another turn. "We thought it would be," he murmured.

He kept his cool as he paid the tab, but he was burning as we went up to the room. "Stupid acid head! We're probably the only guests in this flea bag all month."

"Down, boy," I said. "The boy's stuck in a little job, has to build it up now and then."

Barney wasn't mollified. His mood was still edgy some twenty minutes later when a short knock echoed on our door.

I answered, glimpsed a stocky character in a neat hat-and-uniform getup standing in the hall. There was a shiny badge affixed to the uniform's shirt. The badge read *Sheriff*.

I said, "Yes?"

Our visitor advanced into the room, openly surveying us. From the bed, Barney regarded him with disfavor. "Won't you come in?" he said.

The sheriff wasn't abashed. He manufactured an impersonal smile, said, "Good afternoon, gentlemen. I'm Sheriff Hibbs. I thought I'd drop up."

Barney grunted. "You 'drop up' with everybody who checks into your hotel, Sheriff?"

Hibbs shook his head. "No," he said soberly, "but I do like to meet anybody I get a special report on."

Momentarily, my scalp prickled. Our latest activity in several adjacent commonwealths (taking orders, with down payment, for home siding without affinity with actual manufacturer thereof) had ultimately aroused the collective constabulary to the point where departure for safer environs had been dictated. Had flyers on our dealings reached Hibbs's office?

Abruptly, I relaxed. If he'd had anything specific, the sheriff's gambit would have been direct. His offbeat approach could only mean one thing.

Barney, too, read the scoreboard. "And the keeper of the keys, downstairs, phoned you that special report," he told the sheriff bluntly.

"In a word, yes," he replied.
"Why?"

The sheriff made a vague gesture. "He wasn't too—ah—impressed with your appearance," he said. Pausing, he added quietly, "Nor am I."

Barney flushed, got off the bed. "Are you trying to roust us, Sheriff?"

The phrase wasn't too felicitous, considering the circumstances. Hibbs met Barney's flat stare calmly. "That's your word, mister," he countered "although, now that you've brought it up, I suppose I am."

"Why?" Barney demanded again.

The sheriff chose to ignore the query for the moment. His tone hardened as he extended one hand. "Let's see your identification."

Barney tried to stare Hibbs down, couldn't. In point of fact, the request presented no true problem. As a precautionary ploy, we habitually carried suitable 'identification' with fictitious identities as duly inscribed on the hotel register.

Barney finally produced such credentials. I did likewise.

The sheriff studied the material, passed it back. His sharp gaze, flicking about the room, still mirrored doubt as he took in our single suitcase.

"You're traveling light."

Barney eased his truculence, advanced another cover we sometimes used. "We're advance agents for a magazine subscription crew which will be moving into this area next week," he explained. "The rest of our supplies will arrive then."

Hibbs appeared to ponder the information. Then he said simply, "That's unfortunate."

Barney blinked. "Eh?"

The sheriff's impersonal smile was back. "Because you gentlemen won't be here next week."

"Listen, Sheriff—"

"You listen," Hibbs cut in. "I run a quiet, lawful town here and I aim to keep it that way. I've still got some doubts about you two and I could probably check you out, but I'm a little busy. So you'll spare me the trouble by leaving"—his look was tight—"by noon tomorrow."

He turned then, moved to the door. "Enjoy your evening," he told us pleasantly as he left.

Barney was fuming. "*Hick cop!* Him and that crummy fink downstairs!"

I tried to placate him. "We were moving on tomorrow, anyway," I said.

"I know that. But they still bug me."

"Forget it," I said. "Let's wash up and go find some supper. Even this burg should have

at least one half-decent restaurant."

The Blue Jay Café, two blocks from the hotel, wasn't likely to be franchised by Howard Johnson's, but it appeared neat and clean enough. As a matter of fact, the blue-plate special of ham and cabbage and boiled potatoes was quite tasty.

Another tasty item was the Blue Jay's waitress. Blonde and perky, she had a ready smile and agreeable manner which undoubtedly were good for extra tips. The snug white uniform she wore also helped out in that department.

Soured as he was, Barney started pitching, which didn't surprise me, knowing his ready eye for chicks. It developed the girl—Claire—went off duty in an hour, upon learning which Barney's bad mood evaporated completely.

"Why don't you go back to the room and rest up, Al?" he suggested, getting me aside for a moment. "Claire and I'll take in the movie."

"Okay," I agreed, being truly bushed from driving, "but in this town the latest film probably will be a Jimmy Cagney gangster epic."

Returning to the hotel, I checked the movie marquee and saw I was wrong about Cagney. It was Edward G. Robinson.

I was still awake, drowsing

over a paperback, when Barney finally checked in. "Real swinging evening, eh?" I said.

He didn't banter. Instead, he flopped on the bed, gave me a jubilant look. "Al, we're in like Flynn."

"For what?"

"For the biggest score we've ever had. Five G's or more."

I sat up. "What was on the popcorn?"

"I'm serious," Barney said. "Get this—Claire has a kid sister who works the desk at the Monarch Inn. That's a posh motel on the state highway three miles from here. Naturally, sis knows just about everything that goes on at the place. She told Claire there's a monthly high-stakes poker game attended by six or eight big-wheel industrialists who drive out from Capitol City.

"The inn is over the city line and the county officials, which include our hick sheriff, aren't too concerned with social gambling." Barney paused. "There's usually five to ten thousand in the room—and the next session is scheduled for tomorrow night."

I felt a decided chill as the import of Barney's recitation washed over me. "So?" I hazarded.

"So we heist the game," he said simply.

"You're crazy," I said. "We're

con men, not heisters. We've never even had a gun between us."

"We still won't," he said. "There's a dime store next to the movie; we can pick up a couple of toy ones that'll look real enough when we barge in and start waving them around. At the same time, we'll get some panty hose to make masks."

He was winging it, for sure. I had to axe the whole idea fast. "No go," I said. "We'd blow it. It's out of our league—way out."

Barney was insistent. "So for five grand, we expand—get out of a rut. And before you tell me again we can't, listen to how I've got it figured."

I listened—with some yielding—because the operation he'd dreamed up had some intriguing aspects. We would drive over to the motel in the morning, register, spend the day in our unit. At night, we'd tab the gaming room by watching a concentration of entrants. We'd let the game get established—and then we'd crash the party, collect cash, wallets, the works.

"Then comes the kicker," Barney said. "Afterward, we don't hightail it away from the motel. We just slip back to our own unit and sit pat. The players call the Highway Patrol

and the cops send out APBs like crazy, chase their tails all over the county. The next day, or whenever we like, we simply leave—with a bundle."

I had to acknowledge it sounded smooth. But if Sheriff Hibbs was as dedicated to law enforcement as he'd intimated, how come he countenanced a big money monthly poker session in his own jurisdiction? I asked Barney as much.

"In his own town, he plays it heavy, as he did with us, for the benefit of the voters." Barney shrugged. "Out of town, he probably couldn't find that Smokey Bear hat of his in a phone booth."

I still had some misgivings, but finally I gave in. More than anything, it was Barney's kicker that sold me. "All right," I told him, "we'll expand."

He grinned. "Good! Now let's get some sleep."

In the morning, we checked out of the hotel (Barney had a few choice words for Weak Chin), bought two toy pistols and a brace of panty hose at the dime store, then drove the three miles to the state highway and located the Monarch Inn. We spent the rest of the day watching TV, eating at the adjacent restaurant the motel maintained, and fashioning our face masks.

The storm that had threat-

ened yesterday had failed to materialize, but shortly before dusk new flurries began to eddy past our window. "That could be bad," I told Barney. "If the weather turns real nasty, they may call off the session."

"Could be," he said, "but I don't think so. A regular monthly session means they're all true poker buffs, and that type won't be stopped by a little snow. They'll come."

Actually, Barney's contention proved academic, because the flurries stopped shortly after they began. We could relax and await our hosts with their nice green etchings.

The first player arrived shortly after eight. The sixth and last got in a quarter hour later. The gaming room was one of the motel's larger units—a room diagonally across a court from our own and, most fortunately, only some thirty feet distant. Our swift retreat was assured.

We waited until nine, then adjusted our masks, took up our toy guns and a pillow case. Barney cracked our door, peered across the court. "All clear," he muttered. "When we break in, you stand by the door—I'll collect the money." He eased outside. "And keep that toy moving a bit so they don't get a good look at it."

I moved to follow him,

abruptly stopped short. It had started to snow again. "Hold it," I said.

"Huh?"

"That snow—it's coming down pretty good. We'll only be over there a couple of minutes, but we could leave tracks coming back. That would blow the kicker."

Barney swore softly, said, "So far, it's hardly amounted to enough to leave tracks. Even if it does, there's a good chance they won't be noticed in the excitement or they'll be covered up fast with more snow." He squared his shoulders. "This's too good a score to pass up. We'll risk it."

I wasn't too happy with this development but decided we had, indeed, come too far to scratch the whole bit. As they say, nothing ventured...

Five minutes later, I was more than happy we'd gone ahead, because from Barney's initial, "Everybody just sit tight!" to his parting, "Anybody pokes his nose outside this room before we're clear, gets shot," the script was a piece of cake. Stunned, the six players sat immobile while I covered them with my "gun" and Barney circled the table, stuffing cash and wallets into the pillow case.

True, we'd scarcely vacated the premises before a riotous

eruption ensued, replete with shouts, pounding footfalls, the banding on doors as other curious guests emerged and lent their voices to the overall dissonance.

Well before all that, though, we'd made it back unobserved to our own unit. Best of all, the slight traces of our returning tracks were all but covered by the continuing snowfall, and no one had noted even those.

"We *made* it!" Barney exulted as we finished counting the take, which amounted to sixty-one hundred and thirty lovely dollars. "Another fifteen minutes and those tracks will really be covered.

But the Fates decided not to smile that night. Because although Barney's estimated quarter hour stretched into forty minutes and all traces of our foray had been obliterated for all time, we still had unwelcome visitors in the form of a stocky character and associate. The stocky character favored a Smokey Beat hat, while his associate carried a service revolver at the ready.

"I see we meet again, gentlemen," Sheriff Hibbs told us genially. "It appears my original estimate of you was essentially correct." Then, his gaze zeroing in on the pillow case

atop the bed, he nodded at his deputy. "Looks like refund time is here, Charlie. Collect the receipts, will you?"

Predictably, Barney glowered at the sheriff. "You were lucky, mister. I don't know how you were able to tab our tracks coming back here after all that snow, but if you hadn't spotted them you'd've never tumbled to us."

The sheriff shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, mister," he countered. "It's the tracks we *didn't* tab that nailed you. There weren't any. Man or car. None whatever, coming to or leaving this motel after the storm made such tracks possible. That meant whoever pulled the job had staged a shrewdie, had checked in beforehand and was still holed up here afterward." He stopped, spread his hands. "We just searched every unti until we came to you."

Damn! We'd discounted the snow. We hadn't been smart enough to figure it would lend a reverse action to Barney's kicker.

Barney was swearing again. I took a deep breath. "Let's get on with it, Sheriff," I said. "My head hurts."

Hibbs was agreeable to the last. "My pleasure," he said, a genial smile on his face.

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